



Cobourg Taxpayers Association

Making Local Government Accountable

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Public Engagement Policy Failures

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Submission To
Town of Cobourg
Regular Council Meeting
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Good evening Mayor Brocanier, Deputy Mayor Henderson and Councillors. I am Lydia Smith, the President of the Cobourg Taxpayers Association.

I am here because we are troubled by the Town's failure to apply its own Public Engagement policy. Although we will deal with the waterfront playground process specifically, we have also seen this failure with respect to the recent New Amherst School as well as 394 College Street re-zoning issues.

The Town's Public Engagement policy is an 8-page document accompanied by 15 pages of Community Engagement Guidelines plus a 16-page toolkit.

This policy defines engagement as,

“The term used to cover the continuum of purposes or phases for involving the public in municipal issues. The continuum includes sharing information, consultation to test ideas, and collaboration to build solutions and active participation in decision making”.

Let us look at public engagement with respect to the waterfront playground. A timeline of the playground proposal is included in Appendix B. Notice that the process started 2 years ago when the Town first received enquiries from vendors and ended on April 9 of this year when Mayor Brocanier and Councillors Burchat, Darling and Rowden voted 4 to 3 to accept the playground proposal.

I will quickly review the timeline. Starting from left to right in the timeline you can see that there were at least 12 missed opportunities for the Town to engage with the public. While I review the missed opportunities keep in mind the definition of engagement from the Council approved policy is:

- Sharing information
- Consultation to test ideas
- Collaborating to build solutions and active participation in *decision-making*

2016 – Enquiries from vendors came to the Town.

No sharing with the public. No effort for consultation, collaboration or active participation in decision making by the public

2017 – There were more than seven missed opportunities during all the work done with the consultants – stakeholder meetings, open houses, design charrettes, etc. There was no public mention of the proposed water playground or solicitation for input.

In fact, feedback from the public indicated that a water playground *would be the exact opposite of what citizens wanted*. During thinc design's Aug 21 council update, they showed several word clouds (See Appendix B). A word cloud is simply an image composed of words used in a particular text of subject in which the size of each word indicates its frequency or importance.

- Question 1A was, "Please list the top 3 activities you participate in on the waterfront".
The top replies, in order, were: Walking, Beach, Boardwalk and Birdwatching (tied for 3rd)
- Question 1B was, "The top 3 reasons you do not use the waterfront".
The top three reasons for not enjoying the waterfront were: Crowds, Tourists and Parking (tied for 2nd)

We are not sure where a water playground fits in with those priorities that were very clearly declared by Town residents.

In addition, during the April 9 council meeting, we were extremely disturbed to hear Mayor Brocanier say, "*I don't expect that every time that they come back with an implementation phase that we should have to go through the same process again*".

What!?! When did we get into the "*implementation stage*"? The final report has not come back to council and it has not been approved.

Also, the consultants promised the final report for October of last year – 6 months ago. Why has there been such a delay?

To re-cap – In all of 2016, there was no public engagement. In all of 2017, there was no public engagement. In fact, *the water playground is the opposite of what the public said it wanted*.

January 17, 2018 – less than half a dozen people heard about the water playground for the first time when presented in a *verbal* report to the Parks and Rec Advisory Committee. Because the staff report was verbal, the public has no record – no record whatsoever – of what staff told the committee.

In addition to a Public Engagement Policy, the Town also has a Transparency and Accountability Policy. With respect to transparency, it says,
"The Town of Cobourg will conduct its everyday business in an accessible, clear and visible manner, and that the Town's decision-making process is open and clear to the public."

In this case, it clearly was not since *there is absolutely no public record of what staff actually told the committee*.

January 29, 2018 – In a staff report to council, staff announced that they were preparing a Request for Proposal for a water playground. *This meant that staff had already started allocating time and effort to this project – without sharing, consultation, or collaboration and active participation from the public. No public engagement.*

February 22, 2018 – the Request for Proposal closed

April 2, 2018 – Staff asked for council authorization to negotiate a contract for a water playground with ATL Distributing. Lots of both staff and council time spent discussing: background, analysis, pricing, logistics, location, financial implications, etc. It was obvious staff had put a lot of time and effort into this water playground. The public were still not invited to share, consult, collaborate and actively participate.

April 7 2018 – less than 48 hours before the vote – finally, **finally**, the public was asked for feedback when a pop-up appeared on the Town’s website on Saturday morning. This was great! Fabulous! The public could go wild -- sharing, consulting, collaborating and actively participating -- on Saturday, Sunday and Monday before the vote at 4PM.

How effective could our Councillors be when they were in last minute mode and scrambling around with public feedback less than 48 hours before their vote. How much time did **THEY** really have to think about and consider the public’s wishes?

April 9, 2018 – Mayor Brocanier and Councillors Burchat, Darling and Rowden voted 4 to 3 for the water playground to go ahead.

To recap:

- The water playground had been on Town staff’s radar for *2 years but without the required public engagement until days prior to approval.*
- The Town’s Public Engagement Policy clearly spells out the responsibilities of the CAO, the Municipal Clerk and staff to,

“Pursue community engagement with the understanding that involving the community leads to better decisions”.
- The Policy spells out Council’s responsibilities to,

“Ensure staff are employing the policy as intended” and to,

“Review information gathered through the community engagement process to better inform council decisions”.

- The Public Engagement Policy also spells out the responsibilities of citizens. Some of them are,

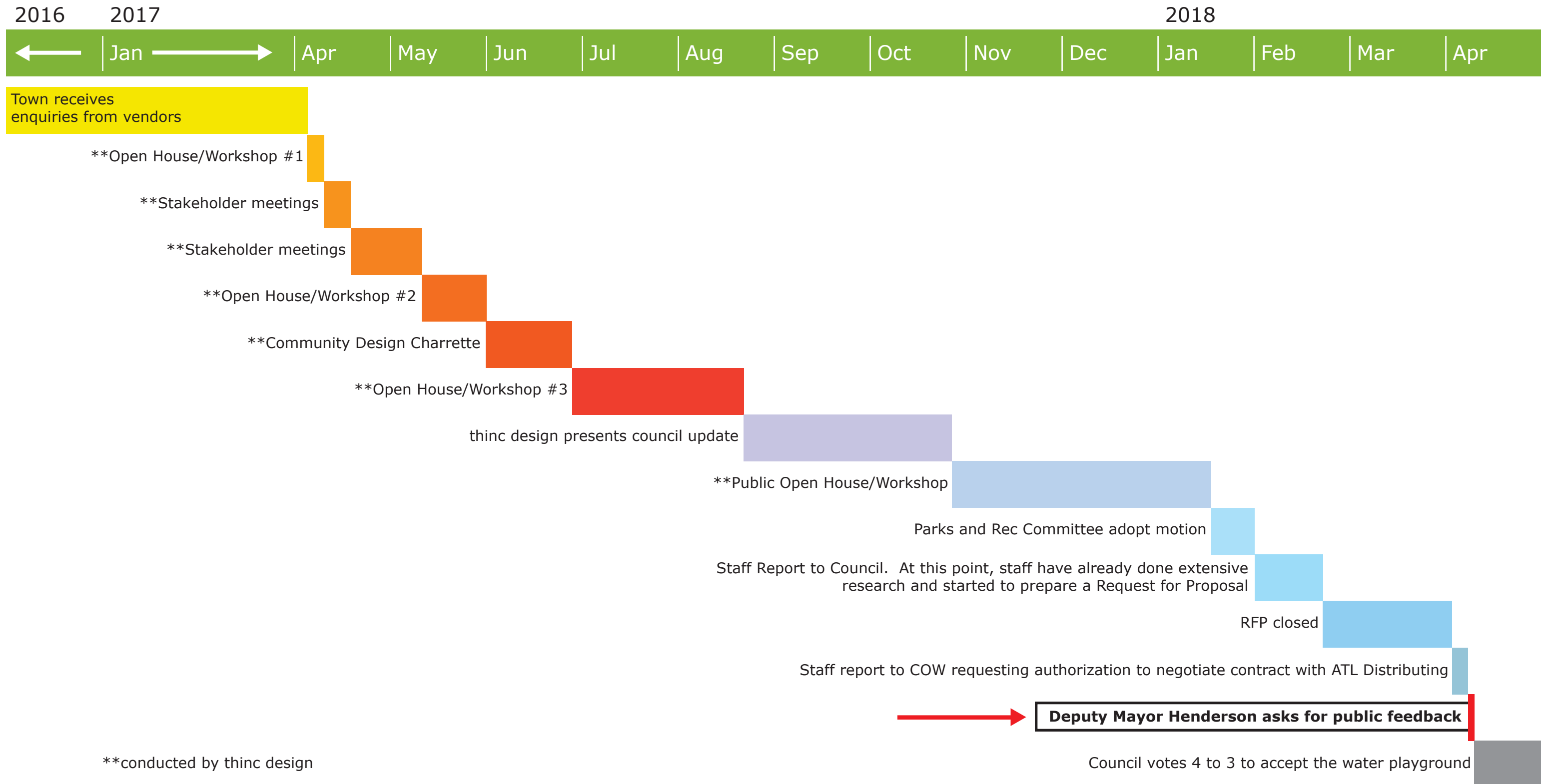
“To identify concerns and issues early in the process” and to

“participate openly, honestly and constructively, offering ideas, suggestions, alternatives”
- There appears to have been a clear failure of the CAO, Municipal Clerk and staff to follow the Town’s approved Public Engagement Policy.
- Council also appears to have failed to ensure that staff followed the policy as intended.
- It appears that citizens are doing their part.

In closing, we respectfully request that Council take the necessary steps to ensure that the CAO, Municipal clerk, and staff comply with the Public Engagement Policy going forward.

Appendix A

Timeline for Waterfront Playground



Appendix B

Question/Comment Sheet

Question #1b responses

The top three reasons you do **not** use the waterfront.

picnic tables too far away from shore

Private ownership of West Beach

traffic Accessibility

parking

crowds

tourists

people breaking rules

volleyball nets

Links to Referenced Documents

<https://cobourg.civicweb.net/document/100796/Town%20of%20Cobourg%20Public%20Engagment%20Policy.pdf>

<https://cobourg.civicweb.net/document/96733/Community%20Engagement%20Guidelines.pdf>

<https://cobourg.civicweb.net/document/75683/Transparency%20and%20Accountability%20Policy.pdf>