

REPORT

TO: Cowichan Bay Improvement District Board
FROM: Natasha Horsman (Horsman Strategies) & Carol Taiji (Taiji Brand Group)
DATE: July 21, 2022
SUBJECT: **Summary of Communications Undertaken for New Cowichan Bay Fire Hall Alternative Approval Process and Recommended Next Steps**

Background

The Cowichan Bay Improvement District (Improvement District) demonstrated its early commitment to community engagement by mobilizing a citizen advisory committee in Fall 2020 to review all the technical information about fire hall options and recommend next steps to the Board. That citizen committee recommended:

“...that the Board should proceed with plans to build a new fire station. Analysis of all information made available to the...Committee makes it clear that the best use of resources is to replace the existing building. Options that looked at renovations and additions to the existing building required sacrificing some operational efficiencies and were as expensive as building new.”

When the citizen committee concluded in early 2021, the Improvement District sent a detailed mailout to postal codes within its boundaries to inform property owners about the need for a new hall and the findings of the citizen committee (available electronically at <https://cbid.cbvfr.com/committee>).

Background information and documentation on the citizen committee is available: <https://cbid.cbvfr.com/committee>.

In Spring 2022, the Improvement District decided to pursue an Alternative Approval Process (AAP) to seek property owner approval to borrow up to \$16 Million to build a new fire hall.

Improvement Districts are governed by Provincial regulations that establish the minimum required public notification for AAPs as two official notices about the AAP in a local publication.

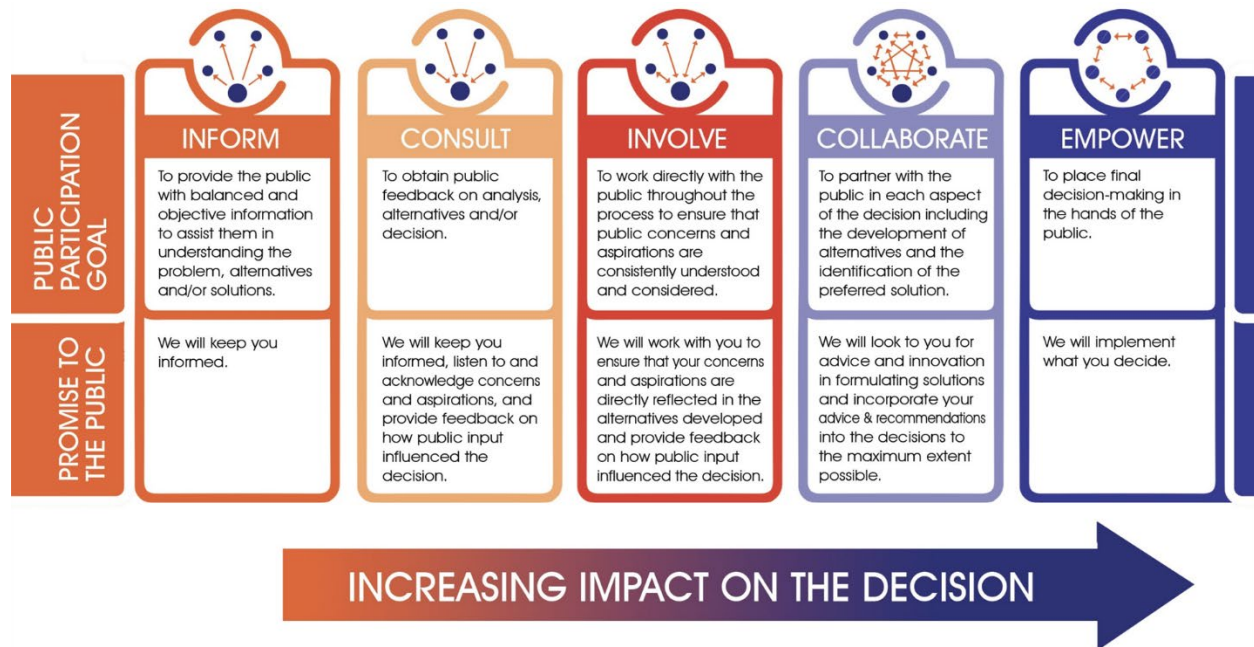
However, the Board of the Improvement District viewed this minimum required notification as insufficient to communicate with local residents about the need for a new fire hall. On March 9, 2022, the Board unanimously passed the following resolution:

“That the Board proceed with an Alternative Approval Process to seek landowner approval to borrow the funds needed for construction of a new Fire Hall, and that the Board distribute comprehensive information to landowners in advance so that landowners are informed about the need for a new fire hall, options that have been explored, tax implications, and process timelines.”

The Board retained Horsman Strategies and Taiji Brand Group to develop and deliver the communications identified in the resolution above.

Summary of Communications Related to New Cowichan Bay Fire Hall

On the [International Association for Public Participation](#) (IAP2) spectrum of public participation, the goal of this project was to **inform** residents about the new fire hall and **empower** them to participate in the AAP. The AAP itself was the tool of empowerment, as the Improvement District was not soliciting input on the nature or design of the proposed new fire hall.



Credit: International Association for Public Participation

The communications vision for this project was to: help the community to understand, value, and support the volunteer fire service that ensures their safety and the urgent need for a new facility for the Cowichan Bay Improvement District.

Between April and July 2022, the Improvement District undertook the following:

- A detailed, highly visual project website (www.cowbayfirehall.com),
- 2 videos (integrated into website) about the Cowichan Bay Fire Rescue and need for a new fire hall,
- A digital billboard about the new fire hall on the Trans-Canada Highway located southbound leaving Duncan heading toward the Improvement District,
- 2 large roadside signs at Valleyview Centre and the Fire Hall property,
- Posters in the community,
- An extensive household mailout to postal codes within the Improvement District,
- An Open House at the fire hall,
- A resident meeting at the Arbutus Ridge Golf Course,
- News release and full-page story in the Cowichan Valley Citizen,
- Full page story in the Cowichan Valley Voice,

- Paid advertisements about the new fire hall in the Cowichan Valley Citizen, Cowichan Valley Voice, and Arbutus Ridge newsletter,
- Informational posts on the Improvement District Facebook page,
- 2-week digital advertising campaign that advertised about the new fire hall and AAP to residents within the Improvement District boundaries, and
- 2 official statutory notices in the Cowichan Valley Citizen.

Summary of Citizen Input

While the Improvement District was not soliciting input, many residents shared their questions, concerns, comments, hopes, and desires for the future of fire protection during the AAP. Citizen input can be summarized into 5 general themes:

1. Dislike for the AAP process

While the Improvement District decided to use an AAP for well-considered reasons, many residents shared that they would have preferred a Referendum. Some people perceive that AAPs are an effort to ‘hide something’ or ‘sweep a decision under the rug.’ The Improvement District worked hard to counter this perception through its transparent and comprehensive communications actions, but nevertheless, some residents dislike the process.

2. Opposition to spending/cost too high

Numerous residents conveyed that they support the fire service and a new fire hall, but they felt costs were too high.

3. Obtain grant funding and explore consolidation

Related to the theme above, some residents stated that they could not support borrowing until the Improvement District first made every effort to obtain grant funding. Others suggested that the Improvement District explore consolidation with other fire departments or integration into a Regional Service.

4. Eliminate any non-essential components of the new hall like community space

Some individuals were happy about the potential for community access to the new fire hall; others stated that the fire hall should not include anything non-essential so as to minimize costs. Through the AAP, it became clear that what was termed “community space” by the citizen advisory committee, is more aptly termed “multi-purpose space,” as it will be used first and foremost by fire personnel for training, emergency response, etc., and can *also* be available to the community when not in use by fire personnel. Similarly, some residents believe that a commercial kitchen is a luxury, which is an area for clarification, as this is a standard and required component of fire halls so that fire personnel can prepare meals for themselves in a food-safe environment.

5. Better inform residents

Some residents conveyed that they had not received any information about the new fire hall and/or AAP from the Improvement District and they had only heard about each from a friend or neighbour. These residents were quite dismayed and felt that the Improvement District should have sent personally addressed mail directly to each property owner. As outlined above, the Improvement District went well beyond the minimum notification requirements, and this issue brings up the question of at what point

residents share responsibility for reading local publications and making efforts to stay informed.

Future Communications for Consideration

The following communications are recommended for the Board's consideration:

1. **News Release:** It is recommended that the Board issue a news release to publicize the results of the AAP. A draft news release is attached for the Board's consideration.
2. **Facebook Posts:** It is recommended that the Board schedule a few Facebook posts about the AAP results, linking to the news release on the project website.
3. **AAP Email Address:** It is recommended that the Board designate someone to monitor the AAP email address (aap@cbvfr.com) for a period of 2-3 weeks to coordinate responses to inquiries that may be as news of the AAP results is publicized.
4. **AAP / Fire Hall Website:** It is recommended that the Board designate Taiji Brand Group to update the project website (www.cowbayfirehall.com) with the results of the AAP and maintain the website for a minimum of 6 months as a community resource.
5. **Community Meeting Prior to Construction:** It is recommended that the Board deliver a community presentation on the new Fire Hall and budget prior to start of any construction (this could take place at a specially scheduled meeting, or it could simply be part of the next AGM). It is recommended that Taiji Brand Group support with developing visuals/slides for the presentation, and that the Improvement District advertise the meeting and presentation heavily.

Respectfully submitted,

Natasha Horsman

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