

## Budget Engagement Process

### *City of Calgary*

*Dialogue Partners was retained to plan, design, implement and report on a comprehensive engagement process on City budget, services, and priorities for the City of Calgary. The Project was framed as a conversational journey for City Council to understand what Calgarians wanted, needed and valued in order to make budgetary decisions that truly reflected participant input. The key question asked of participants was: “How do we deliver City Services that provide quality of life and value for money?”*

**“I rearranged my priorities and realized the city has to do lots more things than those I need.”**

- Participant

### What happened?

A three-phased public engagement process was used to:

- 1) Identify information participants needed and define meaningful involvement;
- 2) Understand what City Services were of most importance and why; and
- 3) Make spending choices and trade-offs.

**This project was new and different.** No municipality in Canada has approached budget decision making in this way. Participants needed to understand how their choices and trade-offs for spending impacted services and to consider their personal; needs, the needs of others and the well-being of the City now and in the future.

**People showed up.** An unprecedented number and diversity of people participated – more than 24,000 over 3 months.

We went to them. With 252 different engagement activities and multiple options for submitting feedback, people could participate the way they most preferred, reducing barriers.

The City listened. City Council minimally increased indicative tax rates to account for growth and inflation, reflecting the request of 58% of participants to maintain current budget levels. City Administration is reviewing the input received to develop business plans and draft budgets that reflect priorities.



*Postcard communicating the phases of engagement.*

**“Thanks for helping to revolutionize the budget process through more proactive, inclusive citizen engagement, and sessions like today.”**

*- Participant*

### **Things we learned along the way.**

**A poll wouldn't give you this.** Establishing and building relationships, trust and credibility, and citizen capacity to participate were goals of the project that went far beyond gathering input to make decisions. Participants told us we succeeded.

**Public engagement is about community building.** We provided training, tools, materials and resources for people to host conversations, connect with other, talk about important issues, and identify with their voice. A sense of ownership, responsibility and desire for continued participation and involvement was developed.

**You need online tools AND face-to-face interactions.** The power of innovative technology had participants readily engaged on Facebook and Twitter in addition to blogs and other social media outlets. We confirmed that while tools support the overall engagement process, they cannot replace face-to-face interaction and dialogue on a complex and deliberative issues. It takes a careful balance of both to be successful.