



Working together with our community

Budget Committee Meeting – October 16, 2025

Subject: 2026 Budget Engagement Campaign Results
Report Number: CS-25-143
Division: Corporate Services
Department: Finance
Ward: All Wards
Purpose: For Information

Recommendation(s):

That report CS-25-143 2026 Budget Engagement Campaign Results be received as information.

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the 2026 Budget Community Engagement campaign, summarize key findings from community input, and help inform Council's decision-making during the 2026 budget deliberation process.

Staff launched the 2026 budget engagement campaign on July 25th, with the goal of connecting more residents with Norfolk County's budget process and gather meaningful input on community priorities, investment preferences, and service levels. Building on feedback from prior years, staff implemented a more comprehensive and accessible strategy, including interactive tools, a simplified survey, and in-person outreach events across multiple locations.

These efforts resulted in a substantial increase in participation compared to recent years. Residents provided constructive feedback on a range of issues, including infrastructure renewal, service delivery, affordability, and community well-being. Responses indicate continued public support for investment in core infrastructure and maintenance of essential services, while also expressing concern about the impact of rising costs on residents.

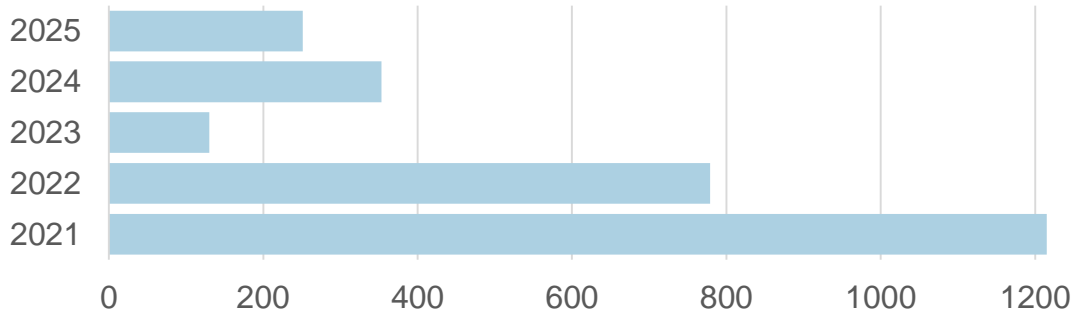
Discussions:

Background

In recent years, Norfolk County has experienced limited participation in its annual budget engagement campaigns, as demonstrated below. For example, in 2024, only 251 responses to the 2025 Budget Survey were received. This relatively low level of engagement prompted concern from staff and some members of Council regarding the

extent to which the County was receiving meaningful input from the community on budget priorities.

Chart 1: Historical Engagement Survey Responses



In response, staff significantly enhanced the 2026 budget engagement campaign, with the goal of making participation more accessible, inclusive, and engaging. The 2026 campaign featured:

- Expanded promotion and outreach through social media, local newspapers, and radio.
- A redesigned online experience on Engage Norfolk, including an improved budget survey, simplified language, interactive tools, and a clear timeline.
- In-person engagement opportunities at community events across multiple wards.
- Options for non-digital feedback to ensure any residents willing were able to participate.

These efforts have yielded strong results, with participation levels substantially higher than in recent years. As of the close of the 2026 campaign, 1,229 residents engaged through the survey, there were over 3,500 visits to the engagement website, and more than 350 participated at in-person events. This represents an increase of approximately 390% compared to 2025 for survey responses.



The following sections of this report provide a summary of results from the 2026 budget engagement campaign, including overall participation levels, key community priorities, and common themes. A full dataset of survey responses and verbatim comments is included in the attachments for Council's reference.

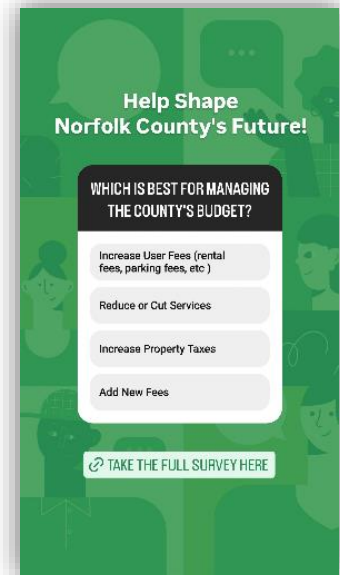
Engagement Approach for 2026

For the 2026 budget cycle, staff designed an engagement campaign that was broader, more accessible, and more visible than in prior years. The intent was to provide multiple, convenient opportunities for residents to share their perspectives on municipal services, budget priorities, and willingness to support changes in service levels.

Communications Campaign

A multi-channel promotion strategy for the 2026 engagement campaign included:

- Social media campaigns (paid and organic on Facebook, Instagram)
- Newspaper advertisements
- Billboard
- Radio
- Flyers at service counters
- eNewsletters



Messaging encouraged engagement and emphasized that resident feedback would be shared with Council to help inform the 2026 budget process.

Online Engagement

The County's digital engagement platform, *Engage Norfolk*, was utilized for the 2026 budget engagement campaign. This featured a redesigned budget survey structured to capture resident priorities and preferences across key service areas.

2026 Budget Community Engagement



Help shape Norfolk County's future!

We're planning for 2026, and your input will help us decide which services and projects to focus on—things like roads, parks, housing, and emergency services.

What is the budget?

Think of the budget as Norfolk County's spending plan. It helps us decide how to use money wisely to support the programs and services you rely on every day, and plan for tomorrow.

The 2026 budget survey was simplified to encourage greater participation and reduce barriers to completion. Engagement best practice suggests that lengthy and complex surveys discourage residents from finishing, particularly as engagement campaigns progress. By simplifying the format, the survey focused on capturing broad themes and priorities rather than detailed line-item feedback. Participants also had the opportunity to include more detailed feedback if desired. This approach will provide Council with clear, high-level insights to guide budget decision-making.

Also, an interactive online budget challenge was implemented to offer another avenue for participation that complemented in person experiences. An opportunity to ‘Share Your Thoughts’ was also available to allow for open written feedback. The page also includes interactive information about the budget process, including a ‘budget at a glance’ overview, timeline with key dates, important links, and contact information for the budget team.

The page was updated from previous years with improved visuals and cleaner design elements that aligned with print and digital advertising to highlight the County’s renewed focus on encouraging resident feedback.

In-Person Opportunities

Staff from Communications and Finance attended three community events across Norfolk to engage directly with residents in a new and accessible way. These events were well-received, generating strong participation and positive feedback. Staff and some members of Council were present at the following events:

- **Simcoe Friendship Festival**
August 2 & 3
- **Port Dover Summer Festival – Art in the Park**
August 16
- **Delhi Fall at the Fields**
September 13



At each event, the County hosted an engagement booth featuring interactive budget activities such as an ideas board and the popular Budget Bean Challenge. Informational resources were also available for residents, including the Recreation Guide and a children’s activity book highlighting County services and providing key contact information, including Council.



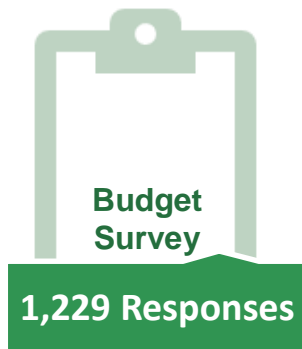
Above: County staff, Council and volunteers at the Simcoe and Port Dover events



Above: Ideas board with ideas and comments shared at the booth.

Summary of Engagement Results

Participation Overview



Budget Survey

The 2026 Budget Survey saw an impressive increase in participation over recent years. In total, **1,229 responses** were received, marking a 390% increase over the 2025 survey. Full results of the survey are included in Attachment 1, with some key demographics and response summaries below. As well, survey questions were included in Instagram stories as polls to encourage participation and awareness. Results of these polls are included in Attachment 3.



Budget Challenge

Like the Budget Bean Challenge completed at the in-person engagement events for 2026, staff created an opportunity on the engagement page to complete the same exercise. A total of **104 responses** were received. Based on the number of responses received, only 88% allocated funds to any of the categories, while 86% of the total funds available were allocated. A comparison of the allocation results from this challenge with the Budget Bean Challenge is included in Chart 8 below. Open comments received on this challenge are included in attachment 5.



Share Your Thoughts

The 2026 budget engagement page also allowed participants an opportunity to share opinions and ideas in an open text format, to allow flexibility outside of the survey. This engagement opportunity saw **58 responses**, which are included in Attachment 2. A comment box was also present at in-person events where residents could submit open feedback. General themes and priorities of these engagement opportunities are summarized below. Detailed comment box responses are included in Attachment 4.



Budget Bean Challenge

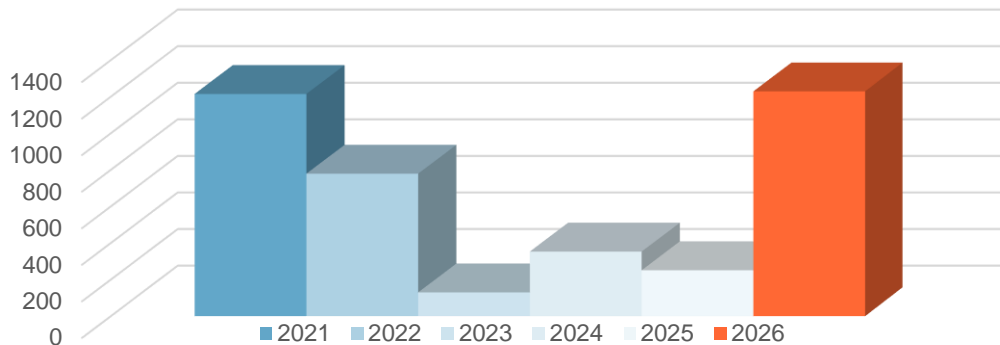
In-person events featured the Budget Bean Challenge, where participants imagine they have an extra 1% to add to our Levy Operating Budget. The challenge here is that additional funding needs to be allocated to the many services that Norfolk County provides. Participants allocated the 1% based on what their priorities are, but many noted how difficult it was to allocate to all the services that are important to them.

Engagement Results

Who We Heard From

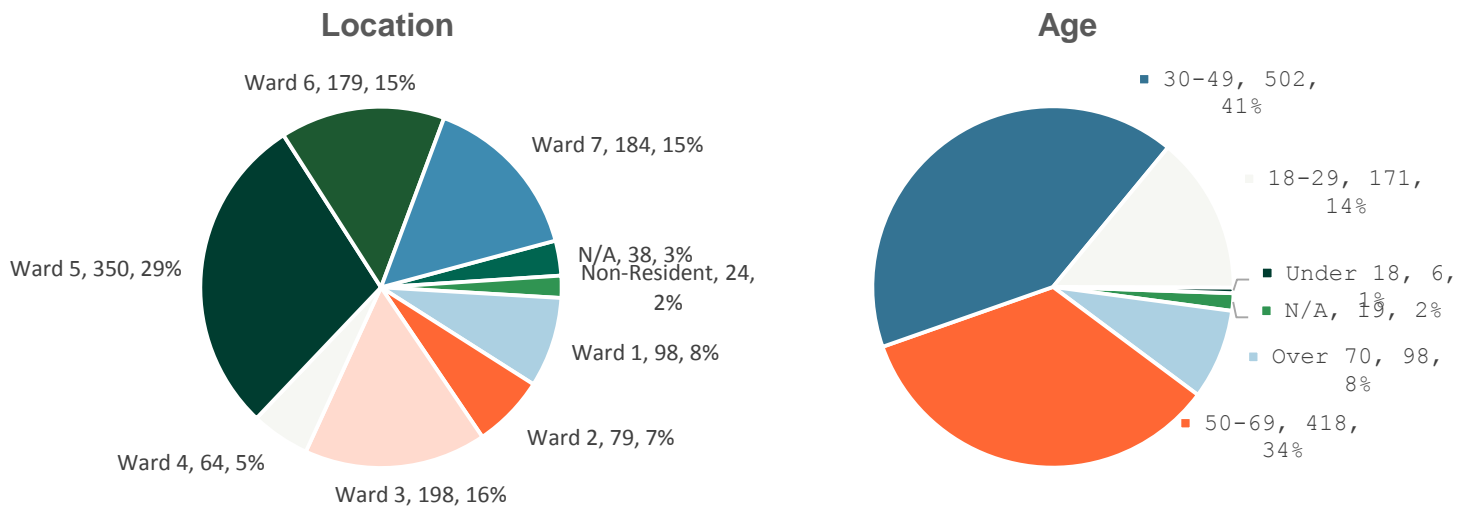
As noted earlier in the report, the budget engagement campaign saw a significant increase in participation compared to previous years. In total, 1,229 residents completed the online survey, with an additional 350+ engaging in person at community events. Enhanced outreach and simplified survey approach are the main drivers of this success.

Chart 2: Comparative Survey Participation by Year



When looking at who participated in the survey, there was good representation across all wards of the County, and across many age brackets. As would be expected, the large majority of responses were from residents between the ages of 30 and 69.

Chart 3: Survey Demographics



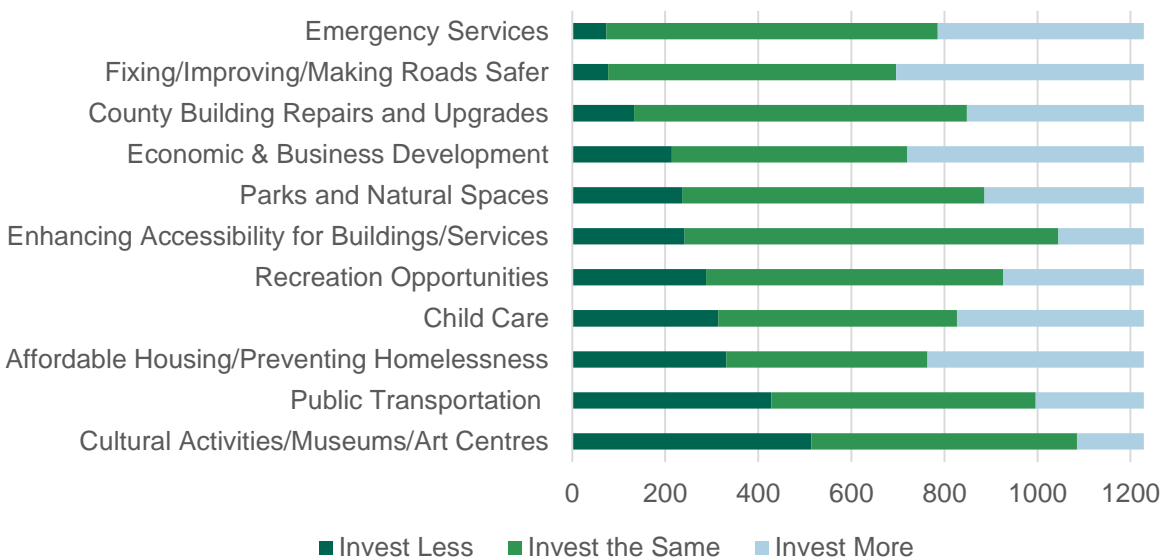
Survey Results

Residents were asked to share their views on how municipal dollars should be prioritized, which services matter most, and how the County should balance service levels with tax impacts. The feedback revealed several consistent themes across both the online survey and in-person engagement.

1. Core Infrastructure Remains a Top Priority

When asked whether the County should invest more, less, or the same level of resources across key service areas, most respondents supported maintaining or increasing current levels of investment across all service areas, suggesting a general preference for maintaining or enhancing County services rather than reducing them. Core infrastructure like Roads and County Buildings remained top priorities, with the majority of respondents indicating support for maintaining or increasing investment. Emergency services also showed a balanced response, suggesting that residents feel current levels are largely appropriate but value continued stability in this area.

Chart 4: Level of Desired Investment

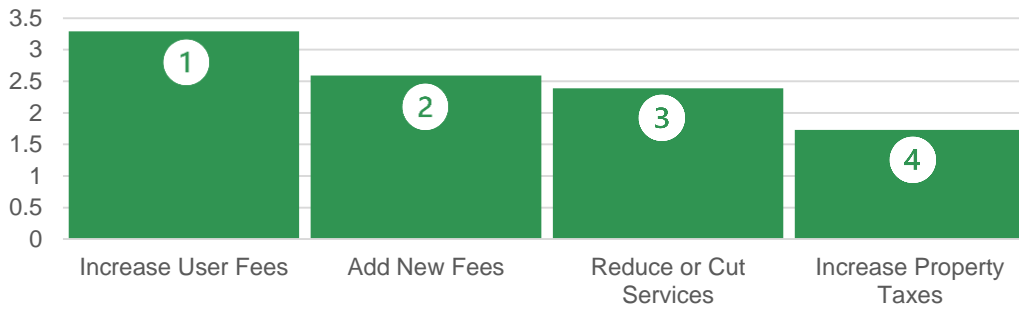


2. Managing Rising Costs

Residents were asked how the County should manage increasing costs related to maintaining facilities, infrastructure, and services. Respondents ranked four possible approaches from most to least preferred.

Increasing user fees and adding new fees were preferred methods for managing rising costs. Cutting services was preferred over the lowest ranked option of increasing property taxes, showing an overall concern of affordability. User based revenues are a tool that can help ensure those utilizing services are the ones paying for them, rather than the cost of service being allocated fully to the general tax base.

Chart 5: Preferred Approach to Rising Costs

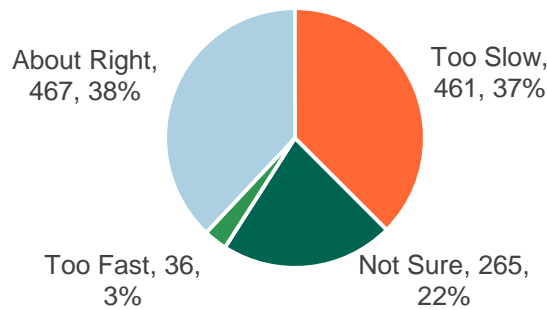


**Note: Rankings were converted so that higher rank represent higher preference. In the survey, a rank of "1" indicated the most preferred option.*

3. Pace of Capital Projects

When asked about the current pace of capital projects in Norfolk County, such as roadwork, water system upgrades, and improvements to public facilities, most respondents felt the pace was appropriate or could improve. These results suggest that residents generally support maintaining or modestly increasing the pace of capital project delivery. While a small portion expressed uncertainty, few felt that projects are proceeding too quickly, supporting overall comfort with the level of current investment and activity.

Chart 6: Current Pace of Capital Projects



4. Water Rates

When asked whether they would support a small increase to water rates to help prevent costly emergency repairs, responses were mixed, reflecting a range of perspectives within the community.

Chart 7: Support for Water Rate Increase to Address Preventative Maintenance



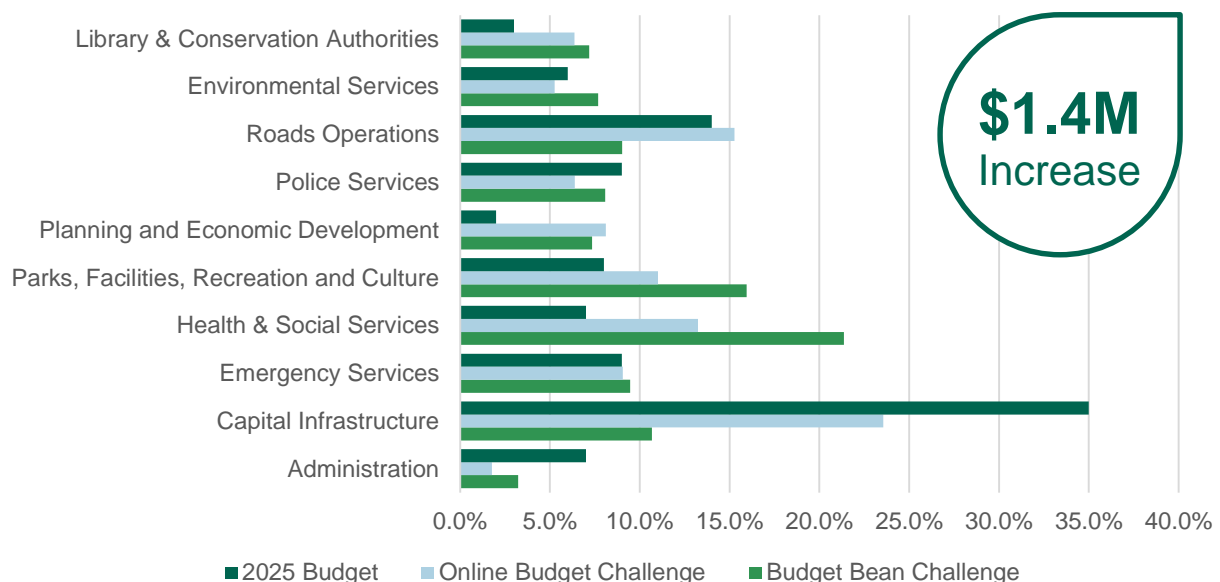
Budget Challenge Results

Through both the online and in-person budget challenges, participants were asked how they would allocate an additional 1% of the annual levy (\$1.4M) toward County services. Results from both activities, below, showed strong interest in funding Health and Social Services, Parks, Facilities, Recreation and Culture, and Capital Infrastructure. The proportion of funding included in the 2025 Levy Operating Budget is included for comparison.

Notably, online participants directed a larger share toward Capital Infrastructure and Roads Operations, while in-person participants in the Budget Bean Challenge placed greater emphasis on Health and Social Services and Recreation.

These differences show that residents prioritize a mix of core infrastructure and community well-being services.

Chart 8: Budget Challenge Results Comparison



Through both budget challenges, participants had opportunity to provide open-ended comments. These are included in Attachment 4 & 5.

Share Your Thoughts – Key Themes

Below is a summary of some key themes included within feedback received through the Share Your Thoughts tool on the budget engagement page, many of which were also present on the ideas board that was available to contribute to at in-person events. Full responses can be reviewed in Attachment 2, and the ideas board will be available in Council chambers when this report is presented.

1. Maintaining Core Infrastructure and Services

Residents consistently emphasized the importance of investing in essential infrastructure such as roads, water and wastewater systems, and public facilities.

Many participants noted that deferred maintenance can lead to higher costs in the long term, showing strong support for proactive, well-planned capital investment.

2. Balancing Affordability with Service Expectations

While there was recognition that costs increase, residents expressed concern about affordability, and the impact of tax increases on households. Comments often reflected a desire for the County to find efficiencies and manage spending carefully.

3. Enhanced Community Well-Being

Participants placed high value on services that contribute to quality of life, including parks, recreation, cultural programming and community spaces. Feedback indicated that residents view these investments as essential to making Norfolk an attractive and livable community.

4. Transparency and Communication

A recurring theme was the need for clear communication about how budget decisions are made and how funds are used. Respondents expressed appreciation for the County’s renewed engagement efforts and encouraged continued openness and public education on how services are funded.

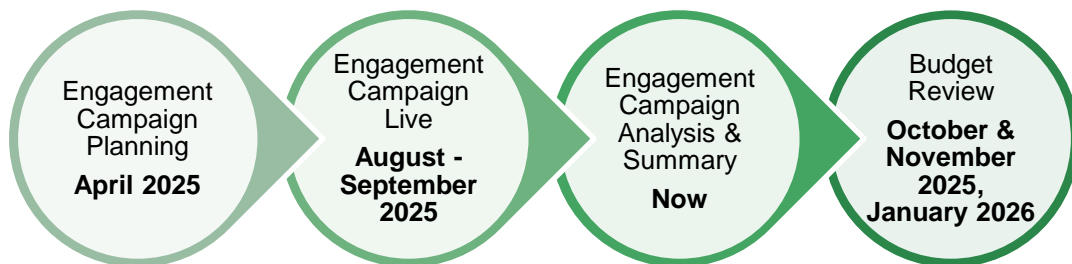
5. Environmental and Sustainable Practices

Several comments highlighted the importance of protecting the natural environment and integrating sustainability into County operations. Residents encouraged investment in initiatives that promote long-term environmental resilience, such as stormwater management, tree planting and energy efficient facilities.

Next Steps

The 2026 budget engagement campaign is now complete, including analysis and summarization of the survey responses and event feedback included with this report. This comprehensive engagement summary has been included on the Budget Committee agenda for Council’s consideration moving into the annual budget reviews, ensuring that community input helps to inform the decision-making process.

Budget Engagement Timeline:



Communication will continue throughout the budget process, with the engagement page staying live to keep residents informed, until all budgets are adopted. Any feedback received after presentation of this report that is applicable to specific budgets, will be shared with Council as those documents are reviewed.

Moving forward, staff will continue to evaluate opportunities to strengthen public participation in future budget cycles. Ideas already under consideration include:

- Expanding the County’s presence at major community events such as the Norfolk County Fair, which draws large and diverse attendance.
- Hosting engagement activities at different times of year to reach residents at different stages of the budget cycle.
- Offering in-person opportunities in varied locations across the County to increase geographic reach and encourage participation.
- Exploring new tools and formats to keep engagement accessible, creative, and representative.

Through these efforts, staff will build on the success of the 2026 campaign and further improve the County’s ability to capture meaningful, broad-based community perspectives on municipal priorities.

Conclusion

The 2026 budget engagement campaign demonstrated meaningful improvement in both participation and quality of feedback compared to previous years. Residents showed strong interest in the County’s financial priorities and a clear desire to see continued investment in essential infrastructure and community services, balanced with fiscal responsibility.

The insights gained through this process will help to support preparation of draft 2026 budgets and inform future engagement strategies to ensure ongoing, meaningful feedback from the community is communicated with Council.

Finance Comments:

There are no direct financial implications currently as this report is for information purposes only. All costs related to the development and implementation of the budget engagement and survey have been accommodated within existing department budgets. The feedback received from the engagement campaign is intended to inform Council of the community’s priorities for consideration while deliberating the operating and capital budgets.

Interdepartmental Implications:

None

Consultation(s):

Communications staff, Supervisor, Financial Initiatives & Planning, Supervisor, Financial Planning & Reporting, General Manager, Corporate Services, Senior Leadership Team

Strategic Plan Linkage:

This report aligns with the 2022-2026 Council Strategic Priority Sustaining Norfolk - Creating a sustainable community and a positive legacy.

Explanation:

The 2026 budget engagement results focus heavily on items related to financial sustainability, service levels and infrastructure.

Attachment(s):

- Attachment 1: 2026 Budget Engagement Survey Report
- Attachment 2: 2026 Budget Engagement Share Your Thoughts Responses
- Attachment 3: 2026 Budget Engagement Social Media Poll Results
- Attachment 4: 2026 Budget Engagement Comment Box Responses
- Attachment 5: 2026 Budget Engagement Challenge Comments

Approval:

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