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# 2023 COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

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## Who We Are

The Communications team consists of the Communications Coordinator and the Manager of Communications & Economic Development.

The Manager of Communications & Economic Development is responsible for leading the planning, development and delivery of internal and external communications, including media/public relations activities.

The Communications Coordinator is responsible for the implementation of the Town's communication objectives and facilitating the communication process. This is done through gathering information and collaborating with department directors in order to develop and distribute content that communicates the organizations activities, projects, initiatives, and other relevant information.

## External Communication

### Introduction

Town leadership and Administration has heard clearly from residents that they desire more communication from the Town on current priorities and activities as well as increased opportunities to provide feedback and input on Town issues that are important to them. Communications is one of five strategic priorities identified by Council in its strategic plan. Council believes that communicating the benefits of Slave Lake and engaging with the community are key to increasing community pride. Under the Communication strategic priority, two key areas of focus have been identified which are both addressed in this Plan:

- Focus on proactive engagement and communication with residents.
- Actively communicate a positive image of Slave Lake.

This document will focus on both external communication with stakeholders and internal communication amongst departments and staff with the intention of building a collaborative, constructive and accountable relationship with the community and within the organization.

### Goals

1. Develop and maintain positive working relationships with all priority stakeholders.
2. Build trust in the Town of Slave Lake.
3. Build mechanisms for receiving and incorporating input/feedback from stakeholders.
4. Increase and maintain transparency where appropriate.
5. Create awareness and increase knowledge of the public process to residents.



## OBJECTIVES

1. Identify priority stakeholders.
2. Establish a strategy for delivering key messages.
3. Identify and address barriers to engagement.
4. Document engagement activities and their outcomes.
5. Set the stage for successful engagement.
6. Understand the cultural, traditional, and unique interests of indigenous peoples including how Town activities may affect their ability to conduct traditional activities.

## Guiding Principles

All external communication efforts will be guided by the Town of Slave Lake's vision statement, mission statement, and strategic plan as directed by Council.

### Vision Statement:

Slave Lake is committed to building opportunities by growing business, industry, and population, while promoting ourselves and our exceptional quality of life.

### Mission Statement:

Working Together, Building a Better Community

Communication between the Town of Slave Lake and stakeholders must be based on consistent and strong messaging and best practices to build trust in the Town. If messaging isn't guided by strong communication principals, trust amongst stakeholders will erode over time. The following principles will guide all communication efforts and activities:

1. Communication is factual.
2. Messaging is easy to understand (and tailored for the intended audience).
3. Information is not retractable.
4. Communication is timely and relevant.
5. Communication and messaging are accessible.
6. Communications must work in respect to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy and be compliant with all applicable laws, regulations, and policy.

## Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses

To guide the development of this Plan and guide future communication efforts, the Communication Department conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of current



communication outputs to ensure the strategies and tactics proposed in this Plan address the results of the analysis.

<p><b>Strengths:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A dedicated and experienced in-house Communications team.</li> <li>• Motivated Senior Staff and Council that encourage clear and transparent communication.</li> <li>• Knowledgeable Administrative Staff that are willing to collaborate when additional support is required.</li> <li>• An established Website.</li> <li>• Established Social Media accounts with an active online local community.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Website is difficult to maintain, hard to navigate, and houses too much information.</li> <li>• The difficulty to navigate the website makes it hard to determine what information is outdated.</li> <li>• The Communications Department does not always receive relevant updates in a timely or detailed manner.</li> <li>• There is a lack of clarity/understanding among residents on the roles and responsibilities of each Department within the Town of Slave Lake.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community is very active on social media and has a strong desire to be informed.</li> <li>• Residents desire to be engaged and provide feedback and input on Town priorities and issues that matter to them.</li> <li>• Have access to multiple platforms that offer a variety of engagement and information sharing tools.</li> <li>• Rework existing platforms so that each provides a specific communication function(s) (i.e., information sharing vs. engagement).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A polarized community.</li> <li>• Misinformation is common and spreads quickly.</li> <li>• A vocal minority regularly challenge Town initiatives and attempt to control the narrative with misinformation or providing baseless claims.</li> <li>• Anyone who shares a differing opinion from the negativity is often attacked online from others in the community. This prevents many residents from participating in discussion and providing feedback.</li> <li>• Slow internal response times leads to a lack of trust in the community.</li> <li>• Information sharing to the community is occasionally lost due to vocal negative public opinion.</li> </ul>

## Strategy and Tactics

The following section presents how goals and objectives will be achieved, how issues will be addressed and the tactics to be used by the communication team in the delivery of key messages.

### Objective 1: Identify priority stakeholders

A stakeholder mapping exercise has been completed internally to help advance the objectives of this plan. The mapping exercise analyses and documents all potential stakeholders and organizes them



according to the impact and influence they hold within the community for future targeted communication efforts. Potential stakeholders include local Non-Government Organizations (NGOs); Indigenous groups; residents; local and regional business and industry; community groups; municipal, provincial, & federal governments, and media organizations. **Please see Appendix A for the Stakeholder Map.**

## Objective 2: Establish a strategy for delivering key messages

The development of key messages or key value points is critical as they serve as the foundation for an organization's branding, marketing, and communication efforts. Key messages should be short, concise statements and should be reflected in all communication efforts moving forward to provide consistency. Key Messages should be shared frequently but not to the point where communication efforts are creating fatigue amongst stakeholders. Key messages must be:

- Factual.
- Easy to understand.
- Not retractable.
- Timely and relevant.
- Accessible.

In 2022, the Town of Slave Lake underwent a rebranding exercise to better position Slave Lake in the market. A community's brand is similar to a personality. Its attributes define who and what a community is all about. Successful brands inform stakeholders, in a memorable way, about the community, its people, and its core values. A brand is made up of experiences, and the quality of those experiences is imperative. By mapping out and managing experiences a stakeholder has with the Town of Slave Lake, it can ensure its differentiated value is communicated in a remarkable and consistent way at every interaction. As part of the rebranding exercise, the Town of Slave Lake developed the following key messages or key value points to guide and serve as the foundation for all future communication efforts.



Key Value Point	Key Messages
<p><b>Northern Connectivity</b> - Slave Lake has the infrastructure, geographic location, and market connectivity needed to empower the creation of a thriving economy that connects north-central Alberta on a global scale.</p>	<p><b>For Residents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slave Lake is home to a population that values a community-centric lifestyle along with easy access to those services and amenities found in cities.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>For Visitors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slave Lake provides a fresh perspective on what a thriving, environmentally conscious, resource-based economy can look like.</li> <li>Daytrips and weekend adventures are easy with Slave Lake only 2.5 hours from the Edmonton Metropolitan Region.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>For Business:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slave Lake's richness in natural assets combined with its location as a service hub for north-central Alberta with efficient access to the Edmonton Metro Region, means it's easier to ship goods and materials along integrated infrastructure including road, rail, and air.</li> </ul>

Key Value Point	Key Messages
<p><b>A Strong Community</b> - One of Canada's youngest communities, the people of Slave Lake work hard, take care of one another, and embody an ambitious and resilient spirit that allows for numerous opportunities.</p>	<p><b>For Residents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The people of Slave Lake have all the ingredients for a strong quality of life. We are neighborly and love the outdoors. We have built a community full of opportunity where people take care of each other today and for generations to come.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>For Visitors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slave Lake is a welcoming community that embraces the supportive lifestyle characterized by the positive relationships and sense of belonging that comes with knowing your neighbours.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>For Business:</b></p>



- Home to the Tri-Council and the sentiment that strength comes from unity; the MD of Lesser Slave River, Sawridge First Nation, and the Town of Slave Lake take a coordinated and collaborative approach to ensuring the community is safer, stronger, and better positioned for future growth.

Key Value Point	Key Messages
<p><b><u>Unlocking Access to the Great Outdoors</u></b> - Slave Lake is home to raw, untamed nature and is committed to building the capacity necessary for visitors to experience some of Alberta's best outdoor recreation.</p>	<p><b>For Residents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Town of Slave Lake is working to tell Slave Lake's story, establishing the unique experience, and generate inbound visitation because we know that when the visitor economy grows, so does Slave Lake.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>For Visitors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From backcountry trails to birdwatching to sandy beaches, Slave Lake offers four seasons of outdoor experiences and adventure, including incredible hikes, being home to Canada's northernmost bird observatory, Alberta's largest automobile accessible lake, cross-country skiing, and ice fishing.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>For Business:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slave Lake is home to raw and untapped natural assets that are foundational for industry and provide investors with the opportunity to develop unique and profitable businesses.</li> </ul>

External messaging and communication outputs will be reviewed and approved by the communications team. The Communications Coordinator will approve messaging for regular day to day communications and updates on social media and the Manager of Communications and Economic Development will approve all other messaging prior to release or distribution. External departmental messages should be sent to the communications team directly from department directors, when possible, to ensure that the information is accurate and approved by the department. Platforms for the delivery of key messages and other communications include (but are not limited to):

- Social media posts (Facebook and Instagram)
- Voyent Alert updates
- Website updates
- EngagementHQ





- Council and Committee of the Whole Meetings
- Digital billboards
- Media releases
- Mailers
- Posters
- Town halls
- Open houses
- Newsletters

### **Objective 3: Identify and address barriers to engagement**

The Town has heard clearly from residents that they would like more opportunities to provide feedback on Town issues that matter to them. As such, the communications department will strive to provide more opportunities for public engagement and allow the opportunity to provide feedback on Town priorities and issues as directed by Council or Administration. The level of participation will be based on the desired objectives for the engagement activity and determined by staff based on the number of residents who will be affected by the issue.

Currently, the Town's social media channels have become an unofficial forum for residents to provide feedback leading to Town discussions frequently getting dominated or derailed by the same small group of individuals who use the opportunity to provide negative feedback on Town activities, programming, and staff. Comments posted to Facebook are public facing and can cause considerable harm to the Town of Slave Lake's image and reputation as well as hinder potential labour attraction and retention efforts both for the municipality as well as local and regional businesses. Official means of providing feedback to the Town (website) are under-utilized and instead, residents use the Town's social media pages as a contact point.

Leadership has recently tasked Administration to turn off commenting on all Facebook posts moving forward and remove outdated posts from the page. The Communications Department supports this decision so that Facebook becomes an information-only communication tool. All targeted engagement and consultation efforts will shift away from social media and move to EngagementHQ and the Town's website. Nationally, many municipalities have turned off Facebook commenting due to public safety, bullying, and harassment concerns (Ferne, Tofino, Sudbury, Duncan, Kamloops, Canmore). Turning off Facebook comments may elicit a strong negative response from some residents that use Facebook as their primary source for attempting to contact the Town and providing feedback. A department contact directory has always been available directly at the top of the Town's Facebook page; additional efforts will be put toward making the Contact Us page on the website more accessible, easier to navigate, and clear so that residents know who to contact within the Town of Slave Lake for various issues and/or concerns.



Administration will implement EngagementHQ as the preferred platform to improve engagement within the community and solicit feedback. Project based initiatives in the Town will be public facing and will create greater transparency and allow for a variety of feedback to be gathered through various engagement tools designed to complete various communication objectives. Administration will also maintain the current provide opportunities for residents to provide general feedback via the Town website.

Comments submitted via EngagementHQ are not public facing and can only be viewed by registered users. EngagementHQ also offers additional moderation controls to Administration that Facebook does not, (removing registered users that consistently breach protocol or those who post comments or feedback that could be considered bullying, harassment, or hate speech) and will allow the Town to hear from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives and not the same handful of negative individuals repeatedly. By switching the primary feedback mechanism from Facebook to EngagementHQ, the Town of Slave Lake can regain control of the narrative and the nature and tone of communication outputs from the Town. Regaining control of the narrative is critical to preventing the creation of an information vacuum. When a vacuum is created, individuals may use it as an opportunity to fill it, often with speculative, inaccurate, or misleading material. To combat this potential misinformation the Town needs to provide accurate and timely information while creating transparency through regular engagement activities. The Communications Department recognizes that EngagementHQ's requirement to register and create an account on the platform represents a significant barrier to engagement as demonstrated through the introduction of the Voyent Alert! App to residents. To ensure residents are provided with easily accessible ways to provide feedback, the Town website will continue to be utilized as a platform for residents to provide general feedback.

#### **Objective 4: Document engagement activities and their outcomes**

The Communications Department has created and will regularly update a consultation and engagement log. The purpose of this log will be to document and summarize all input and feedback received through the Town's communication, consultation, and engagement efforts. It will also record any follow-up actions required by Town staff, by when, and the responsible party. The log will serve as a planning tool for Administration to develop targeted communication efforts and activities aimed at responding to issues identified through consultation and engagement activities and assist in long-term communication strategy and planning. **Please see Appendix B for the Town of Slave Lake Consultation and Engagement Log.**

#### **Objective 5: Set the stage for successful engagement**

The Town will continue to build and maintain positive working relationships and two-way communication with stakeholders and residents through ongoing information sharing and engagement activities. Positive relationships are built on trust, and trust takes time to develop. This



means that the communication team will need to be proactive in communication and engagement activities, ensuring that all outputs and efforts are grounded in best practices and guiding principles to improve transparency internally and externally and build trust amongst all stakeholders. These practices include (but is not limited to):

- Providing consistent messaging.
- Encouraging open and transparent dialogue.
- Including a mix of participation, consultation, and information type activities.
- Providing opportunities for meaningful engagement that results in direct input to individual project design, Town priorities, Town vision, etc.
- Providing timely and accurate information.

The implementation of EngagementHQ (in combination with the Town website) will create a centralized location for all official engagement efforts that will allow more opportunities for receiving feedback, building trust, and creating transparency. EngagementHQ will allow engagement to be customizable allowing a mix of participation, consultation, and information sharing activities.

It is critical that residents and stakeholders feel that they are being heard and that their feedback is valued. Moving forward, the Town will need to clearly demonstrate how feedback was utilized and how it informed project planning, programming, or services offered as appropriate. Through the Completed Projects section on EngagementHQ stakeholders will be able to see the progression of projects and how their feedback directly (or indirectly) informed project planning or other activities.

**Objective 6: Understand the cultural, traditional, and unique interests of indigenous peoples including how Town activities may affect their ability to conduct traditional activities.**

Indigenous peoples have been in Canada since time immemorial. They formed complex social, political, economic, and cultural systems before Europeans came to North America. Colonization and white settlement changed the traditional Indigenous ways of life forever. Colonial practices and policies like the Indian Act and Residential School System sought to control and assimilate Indigenous peoples. These practices and policies, when combined with racism, loss of land, and decline or unequal access to traditional food resources and public services has had significant negative consequences on Indigenous people's health and socio-economic wellbeing.

It is this historic (and current) context that requires an approach to engagement that may differ from non-Indigenous populations. Indigenous communities are unique from one another and therefore, the approach to engagement may differ depending on the community. The following best practices were developed by Alberta Municipalities to guide municipalities in their communication and engagement efforts with Indigenous groups:



- Respect the importance of building genuine relationships. Meet in-person when possible and take the time to build the relationship before you make a request.
- Familiarize yourself with the purpose and practice and traditional protocols (e.g., offering tobacco when seeking advice or knowledge).
- Compensate Elders and Knowledge Keepers for their time and value of their service.
- Take the time to learn about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
- Be familiar with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.
- Acknowledge the land and that we are all partners in the Treaty agreements.
- Recognize that cultural practices may differ from non-Indigenous populations such as the significance of time, how deaths in the community are treated, responding to written communication, or even differences in how handshakes are viewed.
- Consider using a cultural mediator for guidance. A good resource is to contact your local Native Friendship Centre or other Indigenous organization in your region.

## Evaluation

The effectiveness of the communication plan will be determined through the regular use of analytics on the Town's various communication and engagement platforms. This data will help the communications team in determining what is important for stakeholders and what methods of communication solicit the most response and will tailor future communications, consultation, and engagement activities accordingly. In addition to the data analytics provided by the various communication platforms, the following indicators have been identified to measure and evaluate performance:

- At a minimum, monthly posts from each Department highlighting key activities, programming, or their role within the Organization.
- Greater number of respondents to engagement efforts and activities.
- Greater variety of feedback gathered from a greater variety of residents.
- Quarterly review of the engagement log.
- Review of analytics on the Town website, EngagementHQ, and social media to identify trends and alter strategy accordingly.

The plan will be reviewed (and potentially revised) annually to identify new goals and objectives, ensure that it remains aligned with the Town's Strategic Plan, and that the strategies and tactics contained within the plan are effectively completing the goals and objectives.



## Internal Communication

### Introduction

Internal communication is critical to the success of any organization. It serves a variety of functions within an organization. Typically, “there are six functions that dominate communication in the organizational context. The functions are:

- Inform – function of providing needed information to personnel so they can do their jobs in an effective and efficient manner.
- Regulate – communication that is directed toward regulatory policies within the organization or messages about maintenance of the organization.
- Integrate – focused on coordination of tasks, work assignments, group coordination or the fusing of work units toward a common goal.
- Manage - communication focused on getting personnel to do what is needed, learning information about personnel to know them better, and establishing relationships with personnel.
- Persuade – attempting to influence the employee to do something in particular.
- Socialize –It means being integrated into the communication networks in the organization.”<sup>1</sup>

Given that the regulate, persuade, and manage communication functions are typically the responsibility of senior managers and leadership within an organization, this Communication Plan will focus on the inform, integrate, and socialize functions. Town administrative departments need to be working cohesively to ensure that information flows in a timely, relevant, and factual manner to provide the best possible service to residents and stakeholders. Clear understanding of department responsibilities and leadership structure (both internally and externally) will be vital for the organization’s success moving forward.

### Goals

1. Team integration across departments.
2. Clear leadership structure with roles and responsibilities clearly defined and understood.
3. Maintain appropriate protocols when sharing or distributing information.

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<sup>1</sup> Jakubiec, Marcin. (2019). The Importance of Internal Communication for Management of an Organization. Scientific Papers of Silesian University of Technology. Organization and Management Series. 2019. 47-62.



## Strategy and Tactics

The following section presents how goals and objectives will be achieved, how issues will be addressed and the tactics to be used by the communication team in the delivery of key messages.

### OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and address barriers to internal communication.
2. Set clear and realistic expectations for interdepartmental communication.
3. Improve website content and flow to allow ease of use and information flow both internally and externally.
4. Encourage public engagement activities for each department through EngagementHQ and the Town of Slave Lake.

#### Objective 1: Identify and address barriers to internal communication.

Some common barriers to effective internal communication can be found across organizations, these can include but are not limited to:

- Lack of trust in management or colleagues.
- Lack of information on internal communication processes.
- Lack of direct contacts between all employees.
- Lack of internal communication tools dedicated to an organization.
- Long information flows from the top of an organization to the bottom.
- Gossiping, that may lead to a contradiction in announced information to others.

Many of these identified barriers to internal communication can be solved by using soft management skills like targeted conversations and discussions, negotiations, direct contacts, etc. Some factors that influence internal communication processes include (but are not limited to):

- Communication skills of the manager.
- Quality of statements delegated by managers.
- Communication skills of workers.
- Organizational structure.
- Organizational culture and climate.
- Relationships between employees.

The most often employed strategy to address barriers to internal communications is simply communicating more. Often the most effective communication method is simply more direct conversations and meetings with managers so expectations, workflows, and required outputs are clearly defined and understood by both the manager and employee. However, the effectiveness of these conversations and meetings can be influenced by the personality of the manager, management style, relationships between employees representing different departments, relationships between





employees in the same department, and organizational conflicts and changes.<sup>2</sup> To ensure internal communication is effective, senior managers and leadership need to ensure that the right candidates are selected for management roles within the organization and make necessary changes to personnel or policy and procedures when serious internal communication issues arise and continue to occur after corrective action is taken. Addressing other factors that influence internal communication must come from senior management and leadership (i.e., organizational structure, organizational culture and climate) however, all employees have a role to play in effective internal communication across the organization.

### **Objective 2: Set clear expectations for interdepartmental communication**

Historically, the Communications Department has struggled with obtaining all the relevant information from other Departments for either internal or external communication activities in a timely manner (e.g., snow removal updates). Clear expectations need to be set within the organization that if information needs to be shared or feedback solicited for a particular project either externally or internally, it is the responsibility of the applicable department to provide all necessary information and documents to the Communications Department in a timely manner for review. The Communications Department is responsible for ensuring all messaging and information meant for an external or internal audience conforms to all applicable legislation, policies, key messages, and procedures. The Communications Department will also be responsible for determining the best methodology for that communication effort (website, EngagementHQ, social media, etc.) and ensure messaging is drafted with the target audience in mind. The Communications Department will not release any messaging until all relevant information is provided and confirmed by the responsible department to ensure that the messaging is factual, easy to understand, not retractable, timely and relevant, and accessible.

### **Objective 3: Improve website content and information flow to Increase navigability and accessibility both internally and externally**

The website that is currently being hosted by CivicPlus is difficult to navigate, conveys too much information, and contains information that is outdated or no longer relevant. A detailed and comprehensive review will need to be completed to confirm the goals and objectives for the website are still valid and the strategies and tactics used on the website to achieve those goals and objectives are working. It is envisioned that as part of the website review process a detailed site map will be created to ensure that the website is communicating the right information in a way that is easily understood, navigable, and accessible. This site map would be used as the foundation for any revisions or improvements made to the website in the future. It is envisioned that over time,

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<sup>2</sup> Jakubiec, Marcin. (2019). The Importance of Internal Communication for Management of an Organization. Scientific Papers of Silesian University of Technology. Organization and Management Series. 2019. 47-62.



EngagementHQ will become the primary source for detailed project information so that the website can be streamlined to make it more accessible and navigable.

While no major revisions are anticipated for the website in 2023, potential outdated information will be flagged and brought to the attention of department heads to determine if the information should be removed or moved to a different location within the site. Work is currently underway for this maintenance initiative.

#### **Objective 4: Encourage public engagement activities for each department through EngagementHQ.**

EngagementHQ provides the opportunity for departments to directly engage with residents on specific projects using a variety of engagement tools to tailor the message according to the intended audience. The Communications Department will ask that departments review workplans to identify projects that would benefit from, or require engagement with residents, (this will be guided by direction from senior leadership). Once engagement opportunities, requirements, and goals and objectives are identified, the Communications Department will assist other departments in tailoring engagement efforts and activities to ensure the right tools are used for the intended audience and solicit the feedback required.

#### **Evaluation**

The Communications Department has identified the following indicators as it relates to internal communication to measure and evaluate performance:

- Clear understanding among all employees of organizational roles and responsibilities.
- Clear understanding among all employees of organizational structure.
- Increased quality and frequency of intra-organizational discussions.
- EngagementHQ tools are utilized effectively to solicit the required feedback from a variety of residents.
- Conducting peer reviews of internal communication with department heads to determine which strategies are successful and which need to be improved upon.

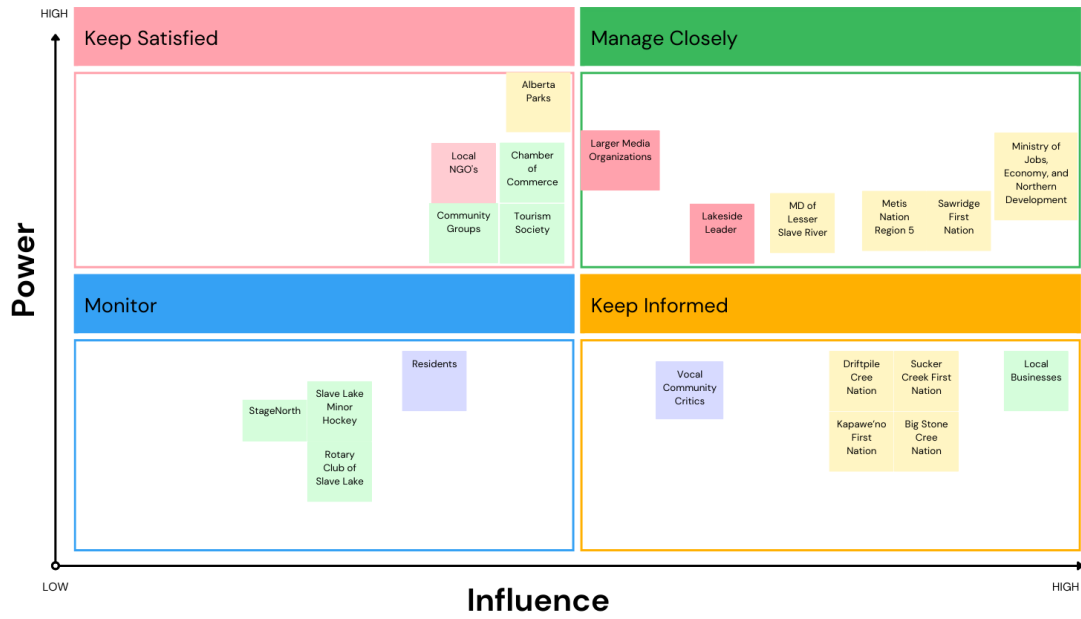
The plan will be reviewed (and potentially revised) annually to identify new goals and objectives, ensure that it remains aligned with the Towns Strategic Plan, and that the strategies and tactics contained within the plan are effectively accomplishing or completing the goals and objectives.





## Appendices

### Appendix A: Stakeholder Map





## Appendix B: Engagement & Consultation Log sample

Date Feedback Provided	Respondent Name and Engagement Tool Used	Project/Topic	Feedback Provided	Follow-Up Response Required? Y/N	Responsible Staff Member	Response Provided On (Date)	Response