THE DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY OF MUSKOKA

To: Chair and Members
Engineering and Public Works Committee and
Finance and Corporate Services Committee

From: Suzanne Olimer
Commissioner of Finance and Corporate Services

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Director, Strategy, Innovation and Communications

Date: September 21, 2026

Subject: 2027 Budget Engagement

Report: FCS-8-2026-6

Recommendation

This report is provided for information.

Origin

This report summarizes the process and results of the 2027 Budget Priorities public engagement and identifies how the feedback will inform preparation of the 2027 District Budget.

Background

The District's Strategic Plan 2023-2026 identifies Service Excellence as an objective to improve how the District communicates, creates better customer experiences, and encourages residents to provide input and share their ideas. The associated Action Plans call for increased public engagement in the budget process and for campaigns that encourage public engagement in Council decision-making.

Previous budget-priority engagements generated approximately 370 and 390 survey responses, in 2024 and 2025 respectively. The results highlighted resident priorities for paramedic services, long-term care, housing and homelessness, roads, waste management, water and wastewater, and childcare and EarlyON services. They also identified a continuing need to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of municipal tax dollars.

Building on those lessons, staff expanded the 2027 budget engagement process to provide more ways to participate, clearer supporting information, and questions designed to better understand priorities, trade-offs, and information needs.

Analysis

A detailed analysis and report on the 2027 Budget Engagement process is included in Appendix I to this report: What We Heard: Public Engagement on the District Municipality of Muskoka 2027 Budget Priorities.

The Analysis section of this report is organized into six (6) sections and summarizes, at a high level:

(1) The 2027 Budget Engagement process;
(2) Level of participation;
(3) Results;
(4) Key themes;
(5) Improvements to the engagement process and practical lessons learned; and,
(6) How the input will be used in the development of the 2027 Staff Proposed Draft Budget.

(1) Engagement process

The 2027 Budget Priorities engagement was open from June 10 to August 13, 2026. Staff used an expanded, multi-channel approach to reach residents and reduce barriers to participation:

- A long-version online budget-priorities survey and a complementary short-version survey were available through the District's Engage Muskoka page.
- Quick polls using engaging and 'attention-grabbing' questions were posted across District social media channels to direct residents to the Engage Muskoka survey page.
- Frequently asked questions (FAQs) were provided to help residents understand the purpose of the engagement and respond to the survey.
- Survey questions were expanded to seek more detailed feedback on affordability, service priorities, budget trade-offs, cost-control options, information needs, and long-term considerations.
- Staff attended nine (9) community events in all six (6) area municipalities. Participants could complete surveys using iPads or paper copies, and staff provided postcards with QR codes for completing the survey later.
- Additional accessible participation options included telephone assistance, paper copies at the District's reception desk and at in-person engagement sessions, and paper copies by mail on request.

(2) Participation and reach

A total of 1,225 people completed a survey: 1,186 completed the long survey and 39 completed the short survey. This is **more than three times the response volume** of the District's most recent budget-priority engagement. The increase reflects a broader and more accessible engagement approach; however, as participation was voluntary, the results represent the views of those who chose to participate and are not statistically representative of all Muskoka residents.

The long survey included respondents from all six area municipalities. Participation was highest among respondents identifying Huntsville (32%) and Bracebridge (30%) as places where they live or own property. Respondents from Gravenhurst and Muskoka Lakes accounted for approximately 16% and 15%, respectfully, and respondents from Lake of Bays (6%) and Georgian Bay (3%) also participated, however at much lower rates. Respondents could select more than one connection or municipality, so categories are not mutually exclusive.

(3) What we heard

The engagement results show a strong expectation that the District balance affordability with the need to maintain essential services, renew infrastructure, and prepare for growth. The key results are summarized below. Participants could select up to three top priorities so percentages will not total 100%.

Key finding	Result / interpretation
Affordability and value for money	50.5% selected affordability as a leading budget value. Residents asked for cost control, clear explanations of tax impacts, and evidence of value for money.
Cost-control approach	53.2% preferred reducing internal and administrative costs before service reductions or higher taxes. 45.4% were open to delaying non-urgent capital work, however, comments cautioned against deferring infrastructure renewal where delay could increase long-term costs, worsen asset condition, reduce reliability, or create safety risks. 31.6% supported shared services and partnerships where they improve value.
Roads, bridges and infrastructure	Roads, bridges and infrastructure were the highest-ranked budget priority at 55.0%. Comments focused on road condition, bridges, drainage, winter maintenance, road markings, sidewalks, shoulders, and a preference for durable repairs over repeated temporary fixes.
Health and paramedic services	54.1% identified health services and paramedics as a top budget priority.
Housing and homelessness	41.8% identified housing and homelessness as a top budget priority.

Key finding	Result / interpretation
Difficult budget choices	Responses to this question were split across the available options: 28.4% wanted more information before choosing an approach; 27.8% preferred lower tax increases even if some projects are delayed or services scaled back; 23.3% preferred maintaining current services with moderate tax increases; and, 20.5% supported investing more now in services and infrastructure, even if taxes increase more.

(4) Key themes from survey comments and responses

Staff have reviewed the key themes from the survey comments and responses and identified the following common messages:

- Keep taxes affordable and demonstrate value for money by managing costs, reviewing programs, considering efficiencies and clearly explaining the tax impact and results of investments.
- Maintain and renew essential infrastructure, including roads, bridges, water and wastewater systems, waste services, drainage and other assets, while avoiding deferral that could increase long-term costs or risks.
- Strengthen health, paramedic, seniors' and community supports, particularly as Muskoka's population grows and ages.
- Address housing affordability and homelessness through sustained action, partnerships and clear communication about the District's role and results.
- Protect Muskoka's environment and build resilience to flooding, changing weather and growth-related pressures.
- Make budget choices transparently by explaining options, trade-offs, service impacts, cost-saving measures and long-term consequences.

(5) Improvements to the engagement process

Compared with the previous budget-priority engagements, the 2027 process provided a broader mix of digital, in-person and assisted participation options. A series of social media posts and advertisements were designed to drive participation in the survey. Social-media polls were crafted to be "attention-grabbing" and created direct pathways to the survey. The FAQs supported informed participation. The enhanced survey design generated feedback not only on preferred services but also on affordability, trade-offs, transparency and residents' information needs. In-person engagement at nine (9) events extended the District's reach across all area municipalities and enabled staff to assist participants directly. These improvements produced a substantially larger response and richer qualitative feedback for staff and Council consideration.

The results also identify practical improvements for future engagement and budget communication. Residents asked for plain-language budget summaries, social-media graphics, mailed or tax-bill inserts, project updates, and a property-tax impact calculator. Staff will consider these preferences in future budget communications, subject to available resources and the budget schedule.

(6) Use of input and next steps

Staff will use the results to inform development of the 2027 Staff Proposed Draft Budget. Feedback will be considered alongside the District's statutory responsibilities, service and asset needs, approved plans, financial capacity, grants and other revenues, and the Chair and Council direction. The "What We Heard" report will be published to close the engagement loop and provide a transparent summary of participation, themes and detailed survey results. Staff Proposed Draft Budgets are expected to be released to the public, stakeholders and Council on December 18, 2026.

Financial Considerations

There are no direct financial implications arising from receiving this report. Costs associated with the 2027 budget engagement were managed within approved operating budgets. The feedback will inform staff's consideration of service priorities, affordability, efficiencies, capital timing and long-term financial sustainability in developing the proposed 2027 budget.

Climate Change Implications

The District assesses climate implications in all staff reports using the Clean Air Partnership's 'Municipal Climate Lens Tool' to consider climate impacts or benefits associated with any project, program or initiative. There is no climate impact related to this report.

The engagement feedback does, however, identify public interest in climate-resilient infrastructure, flooding and drainage, watershed protection, and measurable local environmental outcomes. These considerations will be addressed through the applicable budget and service planning processes.

Communications

The "What We Heard" report will be made available through the District's public-engagement and communication channels. Staff will continue to provide public information on the 2027 budget process, including the release of the Staff Proposed Draft Budgets and opportunities to follow Council and Committee deliberations. Staff will also consider survey feedback on how residents prefer to receive information about the budget.

Accessibility Requirements

The engagement process supported accessibility and inclusion by:

- providing online, in-person, telephone and paper participation options
- plain-language supporting materials and FAQs
- staff assistance with survey completion
- outreach at community events in all six area municipalities.

These approaches help reduce barriers related to internet access, travel, timing and the ability to complete an online survey independently, consistent with the District's obligations under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005.

Strategic Plan

The District assesses the impact or influence of the information or recommendations included in staff reports toward achieving Council's Strategic Plan objectives.

This report includes information or recommendations that impact or influence the following Strategic Plan Objectives:

- Objective 7 Service excellence – Improve how we communicate, create better customer experiences, and encourage residents to provide input and share their ideas.
- Objective 8 Future thinking – Plan and invest so that we have the services and infrastructure our residents and communities need – now and in the future.
- Objective 10 Better together – Strengthen relationships and build partnerships that will make Muskoka better.

Respectfully submitted,

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