

Community Planning & Economic Development Standing Committee
April 11, 2013

TO: Chair and Members of Community Planning & Economic Development
Standing Committee

Original Signed

SUBMITTED BY: Brad Anguish, Director of Community & Recreation Services

DATE: February 18, 2013

SUBJECT: Regional Youth Advisory Committee

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

This report originates from a motion of Regional Council on September 14, 2010:

“MOVED by Councillor Nicoll, seconded by Councillor Karsten, that Halifax Regional Council direct staff to prepare a report on the benefits of switching the Youth Advisory Committee from a Committee of Council to a “group”, so the group is not subject to Administrative Order Number One, and can focus more on actions as was the recommendation of the youth currently serving on the Youth Advisory Committee.”

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

HRM Charter, Section 79 (1)

BACKGROUND

Regional Council approved the creation of a Regional Youth Advisory Committee in March 2007. The Committee was mandated to engage youth in reviewing, evaluating, and making recommendations to Regional Council regarding issues pertaining to youth.

Youth members were recruited through several avenues including youth focus groups. The recruitment process was designed to achieve diverse geographic representation from across the region and to satisfy the following criteria:

- (a) mix of cultural backgrounds and diversity
- (b) mix of academic grade level and economic status
- (c) mix of communities

Council representation was viewed as important to facilitate mentoring opportunities and to develop the skills and capacity of youth in the area of civic governance. Further, Councillors would help advance issues and opportunities presented by youth through the appropriate mechanisms.

In May 2007, the Regional Youth Advisory Committee (RYAC) had its inaugural meeting. The committee was comprised of twelve youth and two members of Halifax Regional Council.

Since forming, the RYAC had opportunities to advise Council and municipal staff on matters of importance to youth, including recreation programs and services, art and culture, environment, events, youth grants, and other relevant issues. The Committee facilitated opportunities for youth to present on important issues and initiated actions internally to address these. The Committee outlined its issues in a report to Council during its first year of operation.

However, in the subsequent years, sustained involvement has been difficult to achieve. For the next three years the Committee held monthly meetings during school months (September to June). Each year there was approximately 75% membership turnover which meant it was difficult for the youth to carry out any long term projects. “Research on volunteering has established that a reluctance to commit to a long-term volunteer assignment is prevalent. Many organizations, including HRM, are experiencing difficulties with volunteer recruitment and retention. Increasingly, volunteers want short-term assignments performed on a one-time-only basis, a specific project, or an event that reoccurs annually. Episodic volunteering is an individualized approach to volunteering as *residents demand greater freedom of choice and assignments with tangible outcomes*”.^[1]

There were also issues in getting the new members up to speed in a timely fashion. In the spring season, quorum was rarely achieved due to other school and exam commitments. Several meetings were cancelled or postponed due to the requirements of Administrative Order Number One.

^[1] Research on the practices of other cities included Waterloo, Ottawa, and Point St. Claire, and several large institutions in HRM - Halifax Regional School Board, QEII Health Sciences Centre, United Way, Sport Nova Scotia, Halifax Regional Library, ISIS, Military Family Resource Centre, YMCA

It was also evident that the youth on the committee tended towards already being engaged and active youth citizens. The goal of attracting diverse youth from a mix of academic, cultural and economic backgrounds was not achieved. In addition, feedback from the youth indicated that they preferred community based settings and that travel was often difficult from the rural and suburban areas.

DISCUSSION

The following discussion provides an overview why a youth group has benefits over an Advisory Committee and staff feedback on a more effective approach to sustained youth engagement.

Youth Group:

A Group setting would make it easier to form a welcoming, youth friendly group who could act in an advisory capacity. Groups tend towards more informal settings where youth feel more comfortable and able to express their concern and expectations in an open forum without a formalized setting.

It would also be less costly to administer a group, as formal standing committees of Regional Council require Clerk's office support through scheduling, agenda preparation, minute taking and follow up.

Ideally a Youth Group is a way to engage youth by having "one voice", represented across the municipality.

Advisory Committee:

Having a Youth Advisory Committee follow Administrative Order Number One does not facilitate a youth friendly environment. Administrative Order Number One has some components that work for youth (i.e., utilizing motions) and some that do not work (i.e., cancellation of the meeting if the Committee could not achieve a Quorum as per 74.1 of Administrative Order Number 1). Cancelling a monthly meeting several times makes the youth who want to participate lose interest. Staff would like youth to learn how to participate in "adult committees", but perhaps workshops on formal committee protocol would be more enticing for the youth.

The Youth to date do not feel the Advisory Committee was open and conducive to informal honest and open feedback. Youth feel somewhat intimidated in the more formal setting. While the Committee approach was a goal to increase their knowledge of civic affairs, this type of forum has not proven effective.

The Committee itself reviewed their mandate and issues related to their role. The youth members find it difficult to discuss issues that affect the municipality as a whole. They are more effective at discussing issues and concerns in their own communities, specifically their local school. Since there are other avenues for working within school settings, combined with the fact that HRM does not directly control the school system, it has become increasingly difficult for the Youth

Committee to make meaningful change. Neither option (formal or informal) would achieve this global approach.

Regardless of whether there is a formal Advisory Committee or a group, it has been evident that the goal of attracting diverse youth from a mix of academic, cultural and economic backgrounds is difficult to achieve. Unless there is a way to guarantee sustained representation from all geographic, social and ethnic backgrounds, some of the more real and diverse issues facing youth throughout HRM will not get highlighted for action.

In addition, with the rise of globalization and social media, it is important for successful youth engagement to have an on-line presence. Neither a Youth Committee nor an informal group can achieve the reach that online presence can achieve. The youth website, www.hrmyouth.ca, satisfies this need well beyond what any youth committee (formal or informal) can achieve. Annually, the web site receives 30,000 hits and is accessible throughout HRM. Recreation staff uses this and other social media tools such as Facebook, to broaden the reach of engagement and assist in spreading the word about HRM's youth services. While communication was one of the original intentions for the work of the committee, it is more effectively achieved through technology and not via a standing youth committee.

Conclusion

Staff and the youth have concluded that simply moving the committee from an Advisory Committee to a Working Group would still lead to similar challenges and that there are other more meaningful ways to engage youth.

While staff have outlined a discussion on the benefits and disadvantages of a group versus a committee, staff and the youth feel there is an even more effective, sustainable way to engage youth at the community based level to address actions instead of moving to a group format. HRM youth want to participate in meaningful interactions and committees. Youth do not want to feel like they are wasting their time as youth have many talents and skills to share. The youth believe that more interaction and networking needs to take place at the individual community level to achieve action.

Since the youth mainly wish to discuss issues and items that directly relate to their respective communities, staff would prefer to act in the role of conduit and as a connecting agent to and for specific opportunities through community based youth engagement approach. Staff can also track common youth issues across HRM for action where appropriate.

Staff are interested in working with youth through existing mechanisms such as youth drop ins, youth action teams and youth events to gain feedback on issues important to Recreation and HRM's Community Planning & Economic Development Standing Committee. Working with the youth, staff could collect information relating to current youth trends and ideas. Regardless, the use of HRM's Youth Website will be maintained and enhanced as a centralized spot for youth to gain access to events, jobs, volunteer opportunities, program information and, in turn, to share information. Social media will also be connected into this experience.

Staff could meet bi-annually to review the current trends and any issues with youth. After each meeting, a status report could be created to update HRM's Community Planning & Economic Development Standing Committee. CP&ED Standing committee may find this more community based approach much more effective for reaching & sustaining diverse groups of various youth from all over the municipality.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications. Oversight, coordination, and support of these youth engagement initiatives will come from existing resources within the Community Recreation & Culture division.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The youth members of the committee were engaged in the development of this report. HRM's continued support of youth engagement demonstrates a commitment to support an engaged community across the region by ensuring there is a range of opportunities for residents to be knowledgeable about local government and actively involved.

ATTACHMENTS

None

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/commcoun/cc.html> then choose the appropriate Community Council and meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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