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**TO:** GENERAL COMMITTEE

**SUBJECT:** PROCEDURE FOR ONLINE COMMUNITY SUGGESTION FORUM

**PREPARED BY AND KEY CONTACT:** S. LAMANTIA  
SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS ADVISOR 

**NOTED BY:** R. JAMES-REID   
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ACCESS BARRIE

**CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER APPROVAL:** C. LADD  
CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER 

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**RECOMMENDED MOTION**

1. That the Procedure pertaining to the Make a Suggestion online engagement forum attached as Appendix "A" to Staff Report ACC001-16, be adopted.

**PURPOSE & BACKGROUND**

Purpose

2. The purpose of this report is to recommend a procedure for the Make a Suggestion online engagement forum. The procedure would establish that once a suggestion reaches 500 votes on the Forum, a memorandum would be presented by the relevant/lead department, to allow City Council to determine whether it wishes to take further action by referring the matter to staff for a report or referring the matter to a Committee for further consideration.

Background

3. In November 2013, Access Barrie launched an online engagement tool called the "Make a Suggestion" Forum ([barrie.ca/Suggestions](http://barrie.ca/Suggestions)). The forum works as a crowdsourcing tool that allows users to create ideas and then vote on them.
4. The forum has been an effective avenue for community engagement. Residents have shared hundreds of ideas and thousands of votes since the forum was launched.
5. How it currently works:
  - a) The user can search the forum to see if their idea has already been shared and then sign in with an email address and vote or comment.
  - b) If the suggestion has not already been made, the resident can add it to the forum, once signed in.
  - c) Once a suggestion reaches 500 votes, Access Barrie officially reviews the idea (including all comments) with relevant departments to determine viability, and then post an update on the forum.
  - d) Each user is limited to ten (10) votes for open suggestions, and can use up to three (3) votes per suggestion. This limit encourages residents to prioritize based on their criteria, which may include personal impact, values, or feasibility. If an idea is later added that a user feels is more important to him/her, they can unvote other ideas to free up more to use.

6. The "Make a Suggestion" forum not only provides residents with an organized way of expressing, categorizing, and collaborating on suggestions for their City; it also provides City staff with the means to identify and measure ideas that are supported by the community.
7. Since voting is limited, residents are encouraged to prioritize ideas they most support; therefore, those suggestions brought forward for review best reflect ideas supported by the community. Unlike other social media channels, the forum is sorted by topics; this helps objectively determine the popularity of ideas.
8. While we encourage residents to use the Make a Suggestion forum to voice ideas because it is measurable, residents are always welcome to make suggestions to the Corporation via other channels available, including by phone, e-mail (cityinfo@barrie.ca), Facebook, Twitter, or in person.
9. In 2015, a resident put forward an idea on the City's Make a Suggestion Forum to install lighting for hockey and/or skating at Strabane Park. The idea quickly gained traction with other residents in the community, reaching 500 votes in just over a month. The 2015 Capital Budget was approved by Council and included the installation of an LED light at Strabane Park for lighting of the volunteer ice rink and the light was installed this past summer. The suggestion from the forum was one of the factors in staff's decision to include it in the proposed 2015 Budget & Business Plan. Although many other factors went into this decision, the popularity of the suggestion on the forum contributed to how it was prioritized with other capital projects.

#### **ANALYSIS**

10. Staff has found that although some of the suggestions can be simple to address, others can be more complex and could require a decision from Council. In those situations, staff would also be required to do extensive research so Council is best informed to make a decision on whether it believes the resources should be committed to research this project, given the many competing priorities.
11. When an idea reaches 500 votes on the forum, it tends to be a popular topic in the community and Council members also receive similar comments or questions from residents.
12. The proposed review process is intended to increase transparency as the discussion of the idea would be made public.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS**

13. There are no environmental matters related to the recommendation.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

14. There are two alternatives available for consideration by General Committee:

### **Alternative #1**

General Committee could choose not to approve the procedure, and instead continue with the current practice of dealing with suggestions that reach 500 votes on the forum. Current practice is for Access Barrie to officially review the idea (including all comments) with relevant departments to determine viability, and then post an update on the forum.

This alternative is not recommended because staff have concerns that the current practice does not help to support the full engagement benefit of the online tool, as there are no formal updates to provide to the public. Staff alone are not authorized to make decisions on certain complex ideas that would require money, changes to by-laws and/or staff resources to implement. In these situations, Council would need to direct staff to investigate or not to. In addition, the dedication of staff time to research an idea that has been generated outside of the Business Plan process should be considered by City Council.

### **Alternative #2**

General Committee could propose that a staff report be prepared outlining the recommended manner of implementing each suggestion that reaches 500 votes. The proposed procedure would provide Council with the opportunity to determine if it wished further steps to be undertaken.

This alternative is not recommended because preparing a staff report on how a suggestion could be implemented without Council's direction to undertake the research may require a significant amount of staff resources to prepare a project that was not part of the Council approved business plan. By providing a memo prior to any request for a staff report or committee referral allows for an additional and more efficient formal update to voters and therefore increases the engagement benefit of the forum. Staff are seeking a consistent approach to the suggestions received, that is clear and fair.

## **FINANCIAL**

15. There is no specific financial impact associated with the recommended motion.

## **LINKAGE TO 2014-2018 COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN**

16. The recommendations included in this Staff Report support the following goals identified in the 2014-2018 Strategic Plan:
- Inclusive Community
17. The Make a Suggestion forum encourages community engagement, and the new policy would help to further promote and facilitate community connections, while increasing transparency of our review process.

**Appendix A - Procedure to review community suggestions that reach 500 votes on forum**

When an idea or suggestion reaches 500 votes on the City's Make a Suggestion online forum, the following procedure should be followed:

1. Access Barrie manages the forum, and will assign the lead department who, if the suggestion were adopted, would be responsible for implementing.
2. The lead department would do a preliminary review of the idea, and draft a memo to Council. The content from the memo would be used by Access Barrie to update the forum.
3. If the suggestion was deemed to be administrative in nature and did not require a significant amount of resources to implement (staff time or funds), the memo would outline the suggestion received and the staff response to the suggestion.
4. Should the suggestion be deemed to be policy related and/or require a significant amount of resources to implement, the memo would outline the suggestion that has been received, along with general information related to the resources and timelines required to research the requirements for implementing the suggestion. Additional information regarding potential costs and revenues would be provided, if available.
5. The memo would be placed on the Circulation List.
6. General Committee/City Council could then decide to take further action by referring the memo to staff for a report or referring it to a reference committee. If the matter was referred to staff or a Committee, the referral would be recorded as an update from Access Barrie to the voters via the forum. If the memo was not referred, the forum would be updated by Access Barrie to advise that the memo had been presented and no further action was taken by General Committee/Council.

