



Staff Report

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Report To:	General Government Committee	
Date of Meeting:	November 29, 2021	Report Number: CSD-008-21
Submitted By:	George Acorn, Director of Community Services	
Reviewed By:	Andrew C. Allison, CAO	Resolution#:
File Number:	[If applicable, enter File Number]	By-law Number:
Report Subject:	Going Green: Future Direction of the Recreation and Leisure Guide	

Recommendations:

1. That Report CSD-008-21 and any related communication items, be received;
2. That the Recreation and Leisure Guide no longer be produced;
3. That the necessary changes be made to the 2022 operating budget; and
4. That Council direct staff to continue to develop targeted and sessionally updated Marketing Campaigns to promote registration in municipal programs and activities.

Report Overview

In the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, one of Council's key goals is Environmental Sustainability, specifically, the promotion of the four Rs: refuse, reuse, reduce and recycle. Since Council has worked toward eliminating single-use plastics in Municipal buildings, staff feel it's time to review the production, printing and distribution of the Recreation and Leisure Guide (the Guide) to further reduce our environmental footprint and associated monetary costs.

Currently, Communications in collaboration with Community Services, design, print, and produce four Guides per year (spring, summer, fall, winter.) On average, prior to the Pandemic, one edition of the Guide was made up of approximately 100 pages, with 28,000 copies printed. This translates to an estimated 28,200 pounds of wood used and around 91,100 pounds of carbon dioxide emitted in the process to make paper, which produces more than 5,500 pounds of solid waste. This is based on approximate calculations using an environmental impact online calculator. The Pandemic has made us rethink our approach.

Throughout the Pandemic, staff could not produce a Guide because of the ever-changing nature of the COVID-19 Pandemic and associated public health restrictions. As restrictions eased and programs were re-introduced, there was no lead time to produce the Guide. This provided staff the opportunity to assess the impact on registration levels, and evaluate how best to move forward with the promotion of programs. Using different marketing and promotion approaches, staff have experienced the same level of success with uptake on programs as with the Guide. Therefore, the recommendation from staff is to eliminate the production of the traditional Guide and move to leveraging the website, the Active Clarington program magazine and additional targeted marketing for specific programs.

This report outlines the new approach that staff are recommending and the supports put in place for customers who cannot access the information on the newly upgraded website.

1. Background

- 1.1. The Recreation and Leisure Guide was first published in the 1970's and up to the start of the Pandemic remained Clarington's main promotional tool to communicate programs to residents. The Municipality published four guides annually, corresponding to the four program sessions. The Guide offered a comprehensive list of Clarington's recreation and leisure programs and activities.

- 1.2. At the height of our Guide producing years, 28,000 copies of the Guide for each of the four sessions, were printed. The majority of the copies were distributed to the community through home delivery of the Clarington This Week newspaper. Originally, this delivery program covered the entire Municipality, however, with delivery changes implemented by Metroland in 2019, home delivery in the rural areas was cancelled and replaced with the strategic placement of newspaper boxes for Guide pickup. As a result, Clarington's Guide will no longer be delivered to all homes as it will not reach every resident through the paper delivery. Hence, the production value is closer to 10,000 copies and can be picked up in our Recreation Facilities and Libraries. The elimination of home delivery ensures people who are interested in a paper copy can access them and reduces waste as some customers prefer to leverage information on-line.
- 1.3. Production of the Guide requires a significant amount of staff time to transfer the information imbedded in the ActiveNet software to a user friendly publication. This involves significant staff time for both Community Services and Communications. This effort is repeated four times per year. Although the objective is to produce an accurate publication, the current process is subject to inadvertent errors.
- 1.4. The work is cumbersome and involves three versions of the Guide per issue, which are proof-read for accuracy, which still can result in some manual errors. Each Guide includes advertisements; some are designed by a Communications Coordinator, while others are submitted in a design-ready format by the advertiser. There is additional time spent organizing, formatting and ensuring a consistent look in each Guide. Once the final document is approved, it is then converted to an accessible interactive PDF for posting on the website, a process that can take up to seven hours.
- 1.5. The Guide also provided free advertising opportunities to the Library, the Museum, the Bowmanville Older Adult Association (BOAA) and the Visual Arts Centre (VAC). While important for these groups to continue advertising, the Guide often contained out-of-date information shortly after printing because of programs changes. Consideration for providing opportunities for these groups has been given with the recommended changes outlined in this report.

2. Financial Considerations

- 2.1. There's a tangible cost associated with the production and distribution of the Guide as contained in the Communications operating budget. The last year that saw four editions of the Guide produced was 2019. The total production and delivery costs for the four editions of the Guide in 2019 was \$59,471. Advertising sales accounted for \$43,945 in revenues, with \$9,932 paid in commissions, leaving the net cost to produce the Guide as \$25,458.

- 2.2. The above total cost to the Municipality per year to produce the four Guides does not include staffing-related costs for production. With reductions through the 2020 budget to Communications, staff believe that more targeted marketing and promotion would be a more fiscally sustainable approach to advertising programs being offered.

3. Recommendations for Change

- 3.1. When the Pandemic hit in March of 2020, staff were forced to review and alter current practices. The approach to advertising programming, including the Guide was considered. By reviewing historical and current Guide production, distribution, uptake, and impact staff are recommending a change in approach. This recommendation will reduce our environmental impact, costs, and will continue to ensure that our customers receive the programming and community information they require to participate in programs and services.
- 3.2. As programs restarted based on easing restrictions and quickly changing Public Health regulations, there often was not enough lead time for Guide production. Once programs restarted, staff introduced a number of different alternatives to the Guide to promote available programming. This included, leveraging the website and social media, emailing current customers through the ActiveNet system and most recently in the Fall of 2021 the introduction of the Active Clarington – A program Snap Shot Magazine. This Magazine highlights new programs, registration information, where to locate the most up-to-date information on the website or in person at our Customer Service Desks.
- 3.3. With the launch of the new site, staff implemented an upgrade to the programming interface using API. This integrates search capabilities between our website and the ActiveNet system in real time. This provides a user-friendly search interface for customers allowing for a seamless experience when searching for program information and registration.
- 3.4. While a growing segment of our customers are accessing their information online, there is still a need to support those who don't. To this end, the Communications Division, in cooperation with Community Service, will create a Marketing campaign, along with promotions and collateral that will hit this target audience. Along with support provided over the phone or in person at the Customer Service Desks in the Recreation Facilities, our customers receive service through multiple channels other than digitally.

- 3.5. The benefits of the recommendations include: elimination of paper waste supporting environmental sustainability (reducing our carbon footprint by 91,100 pounds of carbon dioxide, not to mention the preservation of wood as a natural resource which would be milled to produce the paper), improved accuracy of information (reduction in manual errors) and real time updates. Further, this leverages the power of the existing ActiveNet software, reduces costs to the Municipality and improves the effectiveness of targeted marketing, while providing opportunity for improved customer service for in person support to those who require it, while allowing other customers to use our self serve channels.
- 3.6. Staff tested these assumptions during Fall 2021, the first session where we resumed close to “normal” programming levels. With continuing and changing restrictions, staff could not produce a traditional Guide (tight production timelines and the rapidly changing COVID-19 restrictions did not facilitate a Guide production). Without the Guide, staff saw little impact to programs. In Summer/Fall of 2021 there was an 83.5% program fill rate, with 1,349 waitlisted spots in programs (based on registration statistics from ActiveNet). These statistics support that eliminating the traditional production of the Recreation and Leisure Guide will not negatively impact participation in programs.
- 3.7. The next time (based on production timelines) that a Guide could be produced would be for the Spring 2022 program season. Based on the recommendations staff propose to not reintroduce the Guide at that time.

4. Concurrence

- 4.1. This report has been reviewed by the CAO who concurs with the recommendations.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. While printing of the Recreation and Leisure Guide dates back to the 1970's, much has changed including the fact that environmental sustainability is a key priority in Council's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan. This, coupled with the COVID-19 Pandemic provided staff a unique circumstance that required staff to revisit and evaluate past practices in service delivery and its promotion.
- 5.2. Based on this review of program and service delivery during the Pandemic, staff developed alternative means of marketing and promotion in a targeted and fiscally responsible way. This new approach allows staff to be flexible and to target specific types of communication and marketing to key demographics, making our promotion of programs to our customers more responsive and accurate. This includes consideration to those who prefer more traditional advertising and processes like in person registration, and customer support lines.

- 5.3. The elimination of the guide would have positive impacts that maintains ongoing support of all customers. Therefore it is respectfully recommended that Council support the recommendation to eliminate the production of the traditional Recreation and Leisure Guide and direct staff to continue to deliver on Marketing campaigns to support the promotion and dissemination of information surrounding our program offerings to customers.

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Attachments:

Not Applicable

Interested Parties:

There are no interested parties to be notified of Council's decision.