



SOUTH
ALGONQUIN
BUSINESS
ALLIANCE

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January 6, 2025

Dear Ms. LaValley and Mr. Martin,

We are writing to share ongoing concerns regarding the Township's approach to community engagement, evidenced most recently through the process followed for the development of the Economic Development and Tourism strategy, but also as experienced through the current approach to tabling and passing by-laws. While we understand, and share, the challenges of finite resources and limited staff capacity, it is our belief that robust, meaningful, and transparent processes for community engagement and consultation would create more efficiency, reduce administrative burden in the long term, and support more productive and collaborative relationships within our community. We believe that it is not the intent of Council or staff to exclude community members from fully participating in decisions that deeply affect them. However, the current approach to community engagement and consultation would benefit from a thoughtful transformation. It is our belief that we have the shared goal of fostering open and collaborative relationships between Council, staff, and community organizations and individuals, and we are concerned that the current approach does not support this goal.



While it may be technically allowed or within ‘the letter of the law’ regarding legislative requirements, the current approach to consultation provides neither the appearance nor felt experience of true community engagement. Decisions about who is invited to participate in important processes like the Economic Development and Tourism plan development, and other processes like it, often feel opaque and arbitrary, at best, and sometimes appear actively hostile to certain community organizations and individuals, at worst. We would like to believe that this is not the intent of Council or staff, and that hearing this feedback will be as concerning to the Township as it is to community organizations like the South Algonquin Business Alliance. Our members have expressed concerns about the inclusivity of the community engagement process, noting limited (if any) attention given to diversity of participants across gender, economic sector, socioeconomic status, cultural identity, and other critical demographic factors. Our members have also expressed concerns about being explicitly discouraged from participating, either through being directly told they could not attend community engagement meetings or through confusing and indirect communication about the process itself.

We are extremely concerned that there does not appear to be a plan to publicly share a draft of the work prepared by the consultants for community and industry feedback or scrutiny, except as part of the agenda package for the meeting where it will be tabled for Council approval. It is unclear where these faults originate. However, as the work is being completed on behalf of the Township and by federal funding that requires community engagement, such exclusionary practices reflect poorly on the Township and raise serious questions about who the plan is intended to serve. We would very much welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns further, however, there appear to be limited opportunities to engage with the Township on this matter.

Our concerns regarding the Township’s approach to community engagement and consultation extend beyond the single issue of the Economic Development and Tourism plan development processes. By-laws are typically introduced and read the required three times in a single meeting, without opportunities for the community to meaningfully engage with the process, provide feedback or ask questions. There appears to be very little, if any, opportunities for the community to shape the content or direction of by-laws once they are introduced, given their rapid movement through Council in a single meeting. Often, community members are only aware of new by-laws or changes to



existing by-laws after they have already been passed. This practice feels unnecessarily rushed and exclusionary, and even if it is not intentionally designed this way, the lack of consultation leads to concerns about transparency and whether the Township really wants to ensure the community can participate in decisions that impact them.

Finally, while we know that municipalities in Ontario are not legally required to receive and post correspondence from the public, many municipalities have designed their procedural by-laws to support transparent communication. We strongly believe that the Township's current procedural by-law would benefit from greater attention to the handling of correspondence, including specific explanations for when, why, and how correspondence is included as part of Council agenda packages, as the current version only specifies the order in which correspondence may be presented, but not any provisions for how it is determined whether correspondence will or will not be included in the agenda package. Such review and revision could, and should, be part of an overall review of community engagement, consultation, and communication practices by the Township.

These dynamics may not be by design, but the end result is the same as if they were purposefully undertaken, and we believe it would be to everyone's benefit if the Township reviewed and adopted more robust community engagement practices.


A review of this nature would be in alignment with best practices across municipalities of all sizes in Ontario, Canada, and internationally, many of which have adopted [official community engagement policies](#). Many of these policies are based on the [International Association of Public Participation's \(IAP2\) 'Spectrum of Participation'](#), which has been a global standard for guiding community engagement and consultation since 1999 – and which we have included below for reference.



IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

		INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 				
		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
	PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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As the Township continues its work towards supporting modern governance and meaningful collaboration across the communities, organizations, and individuals that call South Algonquin home, we believe that it is time for the Township to review its approach to community engagement and consultation. Part of this process should include engaging with and integrating feedback from the community on how they would like to participate in Township decision-making, their experience of challenges and concerns in the current approach, and exploring opportunities to facilitate relationship building between the Township and the broader community. Doing so will not only support more productive and collegial relationships and greater democratic participation, but it will also, assuredly, lead to better decisions and better outcomes for everyone.

We would welcome any opportunity to work with and support the Township in its efforts to support meaningful engagement and collaboration across the entire South Algonquin Community.

Thank you, in advance, for your time and consideration.



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Sincerely,

Angela Pollak

Angela Pollak, PhD

Chair, South Algonquin Business Alliance