



PORT COLBORNE

Subject: Community Engagement on the Future of Healthcare in Port Colborne

To: Council

From: Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

Report Number: 2025-19

Meeting Date: January 28, 2025

Recommendation:

That Chief Administrative Officer Report 2025-19 be received; and

That Council direct staff to implement the proposed comprehensive public engagement plan outlined in this report.

Purpose:

On December 3, 2024, Council considered Report 2024-255 regarding the Port Colborne hospital, including a request from Niagara Health for a \$6.2-million local share contribution to the South Niagara Hospital and a proposal to increase primary care services in Port Colborne.

Council requested that staff bring back a comprehensive public engagement plan to gather feedback from the community regarding the primary care proposal, the local share contribution, and the future of the Niagara Health site in Port Colborne.

Background:

Niagara Health is working toward a three-hospital system, which will ultimately include facilities in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, and Welland. A new hospital, known as the South Niagara Hospital, is under construction in Niagara Falls and is expected to open in 2028.

The South Niagara Hospital will be a 469-bed facility offering a full scope of hospital services including emergency, critical care, diagnostics, therapeutic and surgical

services, as well as Centres of Excellence in Complex Care, Wellness in Aging and Stroke.

When the South Niagara Hospital opens, Niagara Health will vacate its site in Port Colborne and will stop delivering healthcare services at the Port Colborne Urgent Care Centre currently located within the facility – expected in 2028.

To prepare for this shift, on December 3, Council considered a proposal regarding an innovative partnership between the City of Port Colborne, Niagara Health and Lockview Medical Group that would strengthen access to primary care in Port Colborne, while also contributing a \$6.2-million local share to support the purchase of furniture, fixtures, and equipment at the South Niagara Hospital.

The proposed partnership is multi-phased and interconnected:

The first phase would see the City of Port Colborne temporarily lease vacant space within the west wing of the Port Colborne site from Niagara Health and then sub-lease it to the Lockview Medical Group.

The Lockview Medical Group would complete a small renovation and then build out a comprehensive primary care clinic, attracting new family physicians to Port Colborne, and offering expanded primary care services, as soon as this year.

Once Niagara Health transitions out of the Port Colborne site in 2028, Niagara Health has agreed to transfer ownership of the site to the City for a nominal fee of \$2, in return for the \$6.2-million local share request supporting the South Niagara Hospital (if the final phase can be achieved).

Finally, in order to fund the \$6.2-million local share without a heavy burden on Port Colborne taxpayers, staff proposed that a developer be sought through a public process to develop the Niagara Health site in Port Colborne. This could include new multi-residential units, an all-new expanded medical clinic, and/or additional health and wellness offerings for the community.

At the December 3, 2024 meeting, Council requested that staff bring back a comprehensive public engagement plan to gather feedback from the community regarding the proposal, the local share contribution, and the future of Niagara Health's Port Colborne site. The proposed public engagement plan is outlined below. Should Council decide to approve the proposed partnership with Niagara Health and the Lockview Medical Group, additional public consultation would occur, particularly related to the proposed development on the site, as the project progresses.

Also at the December 3 meeting, Council requested the leases for the initial primary care expansion within the west wing of the Port Colborne site, with both Niagara Health and Lockview Medical Group, be brought forward for consideration. At this time, these

leases are still in progress and will come forward to a future Council meeting. One challenge in finalizing a proposed lease is determining what happens once Niagara Health vacates the site, if the City does not take over the facility.

Discussion:

Staff are proposing a comprehensive public engagement plan that would gather feedback from the community regarding the proposed primary care expansion, the local share contribution to the South Niagara Hospital site, and the future of Niagara Health's Port Colborne site.

The engagement plan has several high-level objectives, including:

- **Inform the community:** Ensure the community has clear, transparent, and accessible information about the proposed partnership.
- **Gather feedback:** Provide residents with a wide range of in-person and virtual channels so they can freely share their thoughts and ideas.
- **Promote inclusion:** Actively involve diverse community voices to facilitate conversations and representation from often underrepresented groups.
- **Identify concerns and opportunities:** Review feedback to highlight areas of alignment and identify potential improvements or alternatives to the proposal.
- **Ensure transparency:** Provide the community with access to the feedback collected to demonstrate how this information informs Council's decision-making.

The proposed engagement plan includes a variety of channels and mediums to ensure all key audiences are aware of the opportunity to provide feedback and can do so in a way that works best for them. If approved, this plan would include:

1. Online survey / feedback form
2. Paper-based survey / feedback form
3. Pop-up engagements / in-person survey opportunities
4. In-person open houses / drop-in sessions
5. Virtual town hall / panel discussion with community Q&A
6. Stakeholder engagement through Mayor's Healthcare Services Working Group
7. Youth engagement through Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee

Each item is discussed further below:

1. Online survey / feedback form

An online survey would launch on January 29, 2025, and would ask multiple-choice and open-ended questions for community members to offer their thoughts

on the proposed partnership and the future of Niagara Health's Port Colborne site. Multiple-choice questions are an efficient option to collect and analyze feedback, while open-ended questions allow community members to provide qualitative insights in their own words. The survey would close on February 21, 2025.

2. Paper-based survey / feedback form

To accommodate community members without access to the online survey, an identical paper-version would be available at various city facilities (City Hall, Vale Health & Wellness Centre, Port Colborne Public Library), local healthcare facilities, and other key locations throughout the community. The surveys would be collected for analysis beginning February 21, 2025.

3. Pop-up engagements / in-person survey opportunities

A small team of City staff would spend two to three days visiting key locations to engage with residents in-person, using iPads to ask similar questions to the online survey and reporting back on interactions and feedback received. This information would be analyzed and incorporated into the results to be shared with the Council in late March.

4. In-person open houses / drop-in sessions

City staff would host a series of in-person drop-in style open houses on Wednesday, February 19 and Thursday, February 20. Daytime and evening sessions allow residents to attend when it suits their schedule and talk with City staff, representatives from Niagara Health, representatives from the Mayor's Healthcare Working Group, and more. Exact times and locations will follow.

5. Virtual town hall / panel discussion with community Q&A

This interactive virtual event would allow community members the opportunity to engage directly with key spokespeople in a live panel discussion. Residents would be able to submit questions in real-time via chat or a Q&A feature, with a host moderating the event to ensure panelists are able to respond with detailed explanations and provide additional insights. The session would be recorded and archived on the City's website for future reference. The virtual town hall would be a valuable opportunity for residents who may not be able to attend the in-person open houses, allowing them to actively participate and engage in real-time with those involved in the project. The virtual town hall would be scheduled for mid-to-late February.

6. Stakeholder engagement through Mayor's Healthcare Services Working Group

The Mayor's Healthcare Services Working Group was established in 2023. It is comprised of active and retired healthcare professionals, business and community representatives, City staff, and Mayor Steele. The working group will be asked to offer insights and perspectives and will also be asked to share the other public engagement activities within their networks.

7. Youth engagement through the Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee

Ensuring younger members of the community have a voice in the project is a key component. The Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee will be asked to offer insights and perspectives from the youth demographic and will also be asked to share the other public engagement activities with their networks.

Successfully communicating about the engagement opportunities will be a vital part of gathering enough meaningful feedback to support Council's decision-making process. The Corporate Communications team would launch a comprehensive communications campaign to promote the engagement opportunities, which would include (but not be limited to):

- Sharing information on the City's website
- Posting social media content and events on City channels
- Digital advertising opportunities
- Postcards with a QR code delivered to each household
- Media outreach/promotion
- Hard-copy posters with QR codes directed to the online survey shared in key community locations and with community special interest groups
- An article in the February edition of City Hall News
- ...and more.

The engagement project would begin on Wednesday, January 29 and end on Friday, February 21. Once completed, results would be collected, analyzed, and provided to Council in a comprehensive summary report in late March 2025.

This engagement plan ensures residents have a meaningful role in shaping healthcare access and development in Port Colborne, fostering a collaborative approach to these important community decisions.

Internal Consultations:

City staff from Corporate Communications, Corporate Services, Development and Government Relations, and the Office of the Mayor and CAO have been working collaboratively with Niagara Health, the Health Services Working Group, and Dr. Vandenberg on ensuring the best possible primary care services can be made available to Port Colborne residents. These key audiences would also be involved in supporting the implementation of the public engagement plan.

Financial Implications:

This report is focused primarily on the public engagement activities related to expanding primary care in Port Colborne, the future of Niagara Health's Port Colborne site, and the local share contribution towards the new South Niagara Hospital. All costs related to the public engagement activities are captured in the 2025 operating budget.

Public Engagement:

Since 2011, there has been considerable public information provided regarding hospital restructuring to a three-hospital system in Niagara. Community discussions and capital submissions to the Ministry of Health for a new hospital in South Niagara were initiated in 2018 and there has been active and ongoing public engagement. According to information on Niagara Health's website, the community planning and public engagement for the South Niagara Hospital includes the following: 196 Subject Matter Experts involved in user group planning meetings in 2020; 550 hours of group planning meetings with stakeholders in 2020; 5000+ residents provided online feedback; and hundreds more shared their thoughts in person, through emails, phone calls and at public events.

Niagara Health leadership gave a community update and held an open house in Port Colborne on March 21, 2024. The Mayor's Healthcare Services Working Group was formed in 2023 to create a strategy and action plan to ensure that Port Colborne has access to primary care when the Urgent Care Centre closes. There has been media coverage about the Committee's work and updates in public at Council meetings.

The proposed public engagement plan outlined in this report would build on the work that has already been completed to engage further with residents to gather feedback regarding the proposed primary care expansion, the local share contribution to the South Niagara Hospital site, and the future of Niagara Health's Port Colborne site.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

The initiative contained within this report supports the following pillar(s) of the strategic plan:

- Welcoming, Livable, Healthy Community
 - Economic Prosperity
 - Increased Housing Options
 - Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure
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Conclusion:

Niagara Health is working toward a three-hospital system, which will ultimately include facilities in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, and Welland. A new hospital, the South Niagara Hospital, is under construction in Niagara Falls and is expected to open in 2028. When the South Niagara Hospital opens, Niagara Health will vacate its Port Colborne site and will stop delivering healthcare services at the Port Colborne Urgent Care Centre currently located within the facility – expected in 2028.

To prepare for this shift, on December 3, Council considered a proposal regarding an innovative partnership between the City of Port Colborne, Niagara Health and Lockview Medical Group that would strengthen access to primary care in Port Colborne, while also contributing a \$6.2-million local share to support the purchase of furniture, fixtures and equipment at the South Niagara Hospital.

This report presents a proposed public engagement plan that would gather feedback from the community regarding the proposed primary care expansion, the local share contribution to the South Niagara Hospital site, and the future of Niagara Health's Port Colborne site. The engagement plan includes digital, paper-based, virtual and in-person opportunities for residents to provide meaningful feedback that Council can use to support their decision-making going forward. It also provides a plan to engage key audiences through community service groups to ensure marginalized audiences are included and have a genuine opportunity to provide their feedback.

Results of the public engagement initiative and recommendations on next steps would be presented to Council in late March.

Respectfully submitted,

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Report Approval:

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final review and approval by the Chief Administrative Officer.