City of St. Albert Business Leaders Forum

What We Heard Report







Foreword

This report was completed by X5 Management consulting firm for the November 14, 2024, Business Leaders Forum. This independent report summarizes the discussions and key themes, and it will be published on the City of St. Albert Business Forum website page at stalbert.ca/forum.

Introduction

The fourth installment of the Business Leaders Forum was hosted by the City of St. Albert, and it took place at the St. Albert Inn and Suites on Nov. 14, 2024.

This interactive event brought together more than 20 local business leaders to give their recommendations to municipal leaders on the topic of 'Process Improvement and Red Tape Reduction by the City of St. Albert. Following initial presentations by Dan St. Pierre (Manager for Business Retention and Expansion, City of St. Albert) and Kristina Peters (Director, Planning and Development, City of St. Albert), participants were encouraged to provide their feedback to four questions following an interactive "world café" format.

After each question was asked, a breakout discussion would take place. Following the small group discussions, the facilitator (Gordon Sheppard from X5 Management) led a full group discussion so that participant's answers to each question could be shared. A notetaker (Hasan Ahmed from X5 Management) recorded the highlights, along with gathering responses from additional written submissions by individual participants.

The following sections give a brief introduction for the topic along with a summary of the business leader's responses to each question.

How the City of St. Albert Improves Processes and Reduces Red Tape

To start the session, Dan St. Pierre provided the definition of Red Tape and gave examples of how the City of St. Albert addresses red tape within the organization. Kristina Peters spoke next about how the City of St. Albert is improving processes in a variety of ways.

After their presentations, facilitator Gordon Sheppard introduced the World Café format. He posed the first question, prompting participants to form small discussion groups. Afterward, the groups reconvened to share their insights during a collaborative group discussion.

Below are the four questions posed during the session, along with a summary of participant feedback.

Question 1

How do you define 'Red Tape', and provide examples of a time when red tape negatively impacted your business?

Permits and Inspections

Participants, especially those with business interests outside of St. Albert, wondered why there is such a variance in how many municipalities in the region handle permits and inspections. For example, they talked about how some other jurisdictions are ahead on electronic forms processing and they wondered what was possible for the City of St. Albert.

A few people were frustrated by uncertainty around inspector schedules. They requested that communication in this area be improved along with providing clearer time frames for inspections.

There was also frustration expressed because there are multiple contacts at the City for single issues. The hope was that the City could ensure fewer points of contact and less duplication in the area of filling in forms.

Digital Transformation and Efficiency

Some individuals expressed the need for a ‘super app’, as in, one electronic portal at the City that would seamlessly handle key issues that businesspeople need done quickly and efficiently.

For example, right now some processes might be more complicated than they should be and can involve too many emails. A super app could address this by streamlining approvals and reducing paperwork.

It was also suggested that the City look to other jurisdictions (e.g., City of Edmonton) to identify best practices in the processes that they are doing well.

Another comment was that the City should just get started instead of waiting for years to implement a super app. They could do this by implementing a minimum viable approach like a single-issue portal (even if it doesn’t address all needs immediately).

Communication and Transparency

Many participants felt that there is a need for better communication regarding permit and inspection processes. They want more transparency and clarity on what is required.

They also suggested that newer business owners could use an easy-to-follow onboarding process that takes them step-by-step through each detail that is required for their business.

Creating automated flowcharts that make it easier to navigate requirements was one suggestion about how to move forward in this area. Another possibility is to define typical avatars or profiles of common businesses, and then map out the needs of each avatar and ensure that those maps are well understood by City workers so they can move business owners through the system faster.

There were also multiple suggestions to explore how AI could improve overall communication between businesses and the City.

City Brand Enhancement To Improve Attraction and Retention

One key issue that was discussed was in regard to making municipal processes so efficient that businesses will be attracted to set-up in St. Albert, and that ultimately the city's brand and reputation would be improved, leading to higher attraction and retention of businesses.

For example, would ease of doing business attract and retain a robotics company that could set up operations in many other jurisdictions around North America?

Reduce Unnecessary Cost

Small business owners also expressed a need for the City to reduce or eliminate unnecessary costs.

For example, should a home-based business require a business permit if they don't perceive any value from it. Or, when businesses do purchase a permit, then perhaps the City could provide enhanced education opportunities and other perks that would build a better relationship with these business owners.

Question 2

What are some examples in your experience of City processes that worked well for you?

Business License Online Renewal

It was noted that the City of St. Albert's online renewal for business licenses works well.

City Representatives Are Accessible and Easy To Work With

Participants had multiple examples about City officials and workers who are accessible, easy to work with, provide a high level of detail and make relevant recommendations to help them with their business issues.

It was noted that business owners who are more proactive created more interactions, which meant that there is an opportunity to find ways for all business owners to have equal access to City officials and workers.

Permits and Contractor Processes

Some business owners mentioned that the process for contractors obtaining permits was streamlined and efficient. In larger projects it was also noted that the City has provided more flexibility by allowing permits at multiple locations without requiring weekly renewals.

Strong Communication Channels and Networking Opportunities

Participants said that there were many opportunities to network with government representatives and City councillors, and that City communications were supportive and helpful.

Tracking and Issue Resolution Opportunities

Participants asked if the City actually tracks the business application process internally. It was noted that this is being done and that tracking works well with 95% of applications being processed smoothly.

There was also a discussion about the possibility of having the City increase internal staffing so that the tracking process could be improved.

During the talk business leaders also said that they would also value more consistent updates and follow-ups. For example, if other bureaucratic institutions can keep you aware of exactly which step of a process you are on, why can’t the City of St. Albert do the same?

Question 3

What do you think could be done differently to improve processes, timelines and reduce red tape at the City?

Reducing Risk Aversion and Streamlining Decisions

Some participants talked about the reality that government workers can often be risk averse when it comes to updating and changing processes.

This means that there is an opportunity to focus on calculated risks to create an environment of ‘How do we say yes?’ rather than defaulting to ‘no’ when it comes to making changes and improving processes.

Decision-Making Efficiency

Another opportunity that was talked about was to find a way to encourage decision-makers to act promptly so that delays can be avoided.

It was noted that ‘no decision’ is often worse than a timely one. So, the opportunity is to empower City workers to take ownership of decisions in a positive way so that they can make things more efficient for businesses.

Process Improvement and Regular Assessment

The possibility of continuous evaluation was raised, which means that if the City could conduct regular assessments of existing processes, then the potential for streamlining would go up.

Participants talked about a variety of methods (like Lean Six Sigma) that could be explored and used to assist with continuous evaluation and improvement.

Ultimately it was agreed upon that building a culture of openness to process changes across departments would be beneficial.

Business Mindset

Some people suggested that the City develop a business mindset to enhance efficiency and provide more value.

Scorecard for Benchmarking

In the interest of transparency, it was suggested that the City develop a scorecard to compare St. Albert's processes and timelines so it could benchmark its processes against those in other municipalities.

Insights from this scorecard could be used to identify and communicate areas of improvement.

Red Tape Consulting Sessions

Some leaders suggested that the City offer regular "Red Tape Consulting" sessions for businesses to voice concerns and learn ways to navigate municipal requirements.

Digital Registry Enhancements

Some people noted that there is an opportunity to enhance the City's existing registry of businesses by improving its online presence and accessibility.

Then, when businesses put in their information into the registry, they could also self-identify additional services they may need which would create a smoother onboarding experience.

Wayfinding Improvements

For complex business scenarios, some participants talked about the possibility of the City providing dedicated wayfinding support to help businesses connect with relevant stakeholders.

This would position the City as a supportive node for coordinating with other business-related services and organizations.

Question 4

What do you think is critical for the City to address next and why?

More Networking Events

Forum participants wanted more opportunities to network and give their input as they build deeper relationships with City officials and workers.

Improve Business Education

Business leaders noted that it would be helpful to receive more streamlined education from the City especially in the areas of Land Use Bylaws, and competitor analysis.

Conclusion

At the end of the evening Dan St. Pierre and Mike Erickson, Director of Economic Development, provided closing comments and thanked all business leaders and members of City Council for their collaborative approach throughout the evening.

Mike also noted that the City will be sending out the 'What We Heard' report. Visit stalbert.ca/forum to learn more.

Overall, the Business Leaders Forum was highly valuable. Business leaders were passionate and clear about how they wanted the City to improve processes and reduce red tape in the future.