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CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY UPDATE

The Finance and Administration Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report, August 7, 2006, from the Chief Administrative Officer:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that this report be received for information.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with an update on the implementation of the Region's Customer Service Strategy.

3. BACKGROUND

On June 28, 2001, Council adopted the Region's Customer Service Strategy. Over the past five years there have been a number of initiatives that are part of the Region's ongoing commitment to serving its customers. We began reporting on these achievements in 2002 and have highlighted about 370 initiatives, out of a much larger selection provided by the Region's departments, in the first four reports. This report highlights a number of initiatives from June 2005 to June 2006.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Customer Service Strategy Initiatives

During the past year the Region has undertaken or continued a number of initiatives designed to improve customer service to its over 933,000 residents, its businesses and other customers. These will be noted under the Strategy's ten major components.

4.1.1 Leadership

The success of the Region's Customer Service Strategy depends on the continuing commitment and visible support of Council and Senior Management which has been evident in:

- Council's approval and staff implementation of various infrastructure, program and service initiatives

- Launch of the award winning Viva bus rapid transit service, which provides timely, accessible service. Fully implemented, it is estimated that it will take 7,000 cars a day off major arterial roads in York Region
- Council approved funding extension for the Smart Commute Initiative, a cooperative Greater Toronto and Hamilton Region transportation demand management project that helps to address citizens' concerns for the environment and traffic congestion as identified in the Environics survey
- York Region donated a decommissioned ambulance and surplus medical supplies through Friends of Ecuador, for the Firefighters of the City of Guayaquil, Ecuador
- Approval of *Removing Barriers- York Region's 2006 Accessibility Plan*, which contains 71 initiatives from across all Regional departments, aimed at improving access to the Region's services for customers with disabilities
- Increased communication and interaction with staff on news, upcoming events and corporate strategies through the monthly CAO's newsletter and the "Coffee with the CAO" sessions
- Continued customer service messaging in communications and speeches by the Regional Chair and CAO

4.1.2 Continuous Planning for Improvement

The Customer Service Strategy also recommends that the Region's ongoing corporate and business processes include customer service measurements and plans. Initiatives that support this include:

- The annual report on Vision 2026 highlights initiatives under goal 8, "Proactively Meeting the Needs of Our Customers"
- Likewise, the annual Business Plan and Budget contains a number of Key Performance Indicators measuring customer service in areas such as response times and number of complaints. Work is continuing with the Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative (OMBI) to identify further customer service benchmarking measures for various services
- The continuation of a cross-departmental Customer Service Strategy Team, which currently has 17 members representing the Regional Chair's Office, the CAO's Office, and the six Regional Departments
- Continued focus on the implementation of action plans to respond to the Region's extensive employee satisfaction survey

4.1.3 Customer Voice: Seeking the Customer's Views

Another foundation of the Region's Customer Service Strategy is seeking customer views in order to determine customer needs. In this way, the Region's services will be based on customers' direct input rather than on staff perceptions of what the customers need. There has been a great deal of activity in this area over the past five years. Recent initiatives include the following:

- The Region's participation in the *Citizens First 4* survey of citizens' ratings of public sector services

- First-ever inclusion of customer service questions of actual Regional customers, using the Common Measurement Tool, in the annual Environics survey of the GTA. The standard was adopted across the GTA
- Health Services conducted surveys of its long term care facilities clients with an overall rating of 95% good/excellent, 98% for Community Programs and 100% for the Day Centre
- Planning held several open houses and symposia to gather public feedback on initiatives such as: the Pedestrian Cycling Master Plan, “Planning for Tomorrow” and “Towards a Sustainable Region” which focus on growth management
- Transportation and Works established public drop-offs for leaf and yard waste in King Township, Richmond Hill and East Gwillimbury to supplement curbside collection based on customer feedback
- Financial Services hosted the first Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) Symposium including workshops, demonstrations and “meet the expert”. The workshops focused on determining gaps within the ERP system from a client perspective
- Community Services and Housing conducted a focus group involving Ontario Works clients with disabilities to gather information on barriers that they may face in the internal appeal process
- The Employment Resource Centre Customer Survey was administered to gather information about clients’ experiences when visiting one of the Ontario Works (OW) Employment Resource Centres and suggestions for improvement. This is an active initiative as forms are available for participants to provide feedback on an ongoing basis
- Public Health implemented questionnaires/surveys to improve service to high risk prenatal women
- The Human Service Planning Coalition celebrated its Stakeholder Resolution of Support campaign with the support of over 100 human service providers in the Region calling for the provincial government to address the chronic under-funding of human services
- Corporate Communications included a mail-in “feedback form” in the winter edition of YORK WORKS, providing an opportunity for York Region residents to provide comments and ask questions
- Maintenance “reply cards” are available to residents in Social Housing after every repair for indicating their satisfaction with the service. Surveys are also conducted after major capital projects to get resident feedback
- The Community Services and Housing Department actively sought input and advice from citizens, Regional Council and members on the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee on ways to prevent and remove barriers to accessing Regional programs and services

4.1.4 Staff Development

The Region’s Customer Service Strategy states that customer service should be built into all aspects of the Region’s human resource practices so that staff can deliver the best

possible customer service. There have been a number of initiatives in this area over the past year.

- Customer Service remains a Core Competency that is rated in all annual employee performance appraisals
- Corporate Services revamped the existing corporate orientation based on feedback from staff. The result is a dynamic session in which participants learn about Regional services through a “knowledge buffet” and an interactive tour of the Region on a Viva bus
- Corporate Services completed customer service training for 282 staff. Since this program started in late 2002, 2,200 York Region staff have completed the course
- Corporate Services continues to offer other customer service training courses including Professional Telephone Skills, and ODA- *Just Ask- Inclusion & Accessibility*, which teaches staff best practices in serving customers with disabilities
- *A Guide to Customer Service in York Region* was updated and reprinted to include a section on providing customer service to people with disabilities
- Community Services and Housing provided training for Ontario Works staff to improve skills in dealing with issues of family violence while promoting links to critical resources for abused women
- Transportation and Works provided comprehensive training for project management staff regarding the implementation of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Greenbelt Plan, as well as First Nations consultation
- Regional Clerk’s Office provided Records and Information Management awareness sessions to 425 Regional employees, with a focus on managing e-mail and other electronic records to improve customer service
- Information Technology Services offers online self-directed learning for the Microsoft Office suite. Regional staff are able to improve their technical skills at their desktops or from home
- Corporate Communications coordinated 12 *Know York* Sessions featuring a variety of different branches and programs assisting York Region staff to learn more about other areas within the Corporation
- Over 50 staff attended GIS training sessions provided by the Geomatics Branch in Planning to increase service delivery and efficiency to customers
- Financial Services developed and delivered job oriented ERP training for over 400 users using a variety of methods including classroom, remote access and self-directed training video clips
- EMS provided six targeted responder courses and trained 91 municipal employees in the use of CPR and auto defibrillator use
- Newly redesigned Employee Recognition program recognizes “Excellence” and “Accountability”, both of which are key components of customer service

4.1.5 External Communications and Public Outreach

The Region’s Customer Service Strategy is also based on giving the Region’s customers information on the services it provides. Part of the Strategy is to use a variety of means

to build public awareness of the Region and its services to foster community partnerships. Initiatives undertaken in the past year include:

- Corporate Communications took part in five home shows and street festivals throughout the past year, enhancing visibility within York Region and educating the community on services provided by the Region
- Corporate Communications launched an online Newsroom media resource centre intended as a one-stop resource for journalists and news editors
- Six ads were placed through York Region Newspaper Group to promote awareness of Regional initiatives including: 2005 budget, roads and water/wastewater construction, social services and housing, Earth Week, Road Watch 2006, Emergency Preparedness Week 2006 and Census 2006
- Transportation and Works established partnerships with major local retailers, not-for-profit organizations and fast food chains to leverage the Region's promotional efforts to divert Household Hazardous Waste, yard waste and reusable household and construction materials
- Emergency Management educated members of the public at the East Gwillimbury Emergency Preparedness Fair on fire safety and emergency preparedness
- Transportation and Works introduced daily live updates of YRT and Viva service on A-Channel News
- Transportation and Works educated over 1,400 residents through the York Regional Forest Nature's Classroom program
- Solid Waste completed and distributed over 500 copies of its first educational video profiling the operations of the new Waste Management Centre to local schools, libraries and other community centres
- Transportation and Works conducted leadership workshops with the area municipalities and surrounding Regional partners to identify common needs and solutions for reducing sanitary sewer inflow and infiltration
- Transit developed partnerships with the York Region school boards to launch the "Bus It" program in the grade 5 curriculum to increase transit awareness and future ridership
- York Region Tourism published the *2006 Visitors' Guide* with 64 pages of information on event listings, accommodations and attractions within York Region
- Health Services provided several Pandemic Preparedness sessions and conferences to York Region businesses, long term and acute care facilities, and municipalities through Councils and/or task groups
- In partnership with the nine local municipalities, Emergency Management produced and distributed the *Emergency Preparedness Guide*, which gives practical advice to residents on preparing for the first 72 hours of an emergency
- York Children's Water Festival educated 5,154 students from across York Region
- Business Planning and Budgets outlined the Region's key indicators through Municipal Performance Measurement report, which is available to the public online
- Transportation and Works increased advance notice to the public on large construction projects through the use of portable message boards

- Community Services and Housing co-hosted a public forum on the new *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005* (AODA), in partnership with the Region's Accessibility Advisory Committee, to increase awareness of the new legislative requirements and mandatory accessibility standards

4.1.6 Telephones/Telecommunications

The telephone continues to be the most convenient way for the Region's customers to access Regional information and services. Recent initiatives focus on improving the customer experience in contacting the Region by phone:

- Improved internal communication to Regional sites through the Converged Network Project, which will continue into the coming years
- Corporate Services implemented call centre technology at the Richmond Hill Provincial Offences Court to efficiently manage inbound volumes, and quantify volumes for future business planning
- Public Health's Infectious Diseases intake line is now staffed full time by live voice during business hours
- Corporate Communications introduced an after-hours pager to be used by media outlets, ensuring excellent customer service and timely stories on important events and issues
- Call Centres across York Region continued to experience large call volumes, with the following numbers for 2005: Transit 173,500; Community Services and Housing 120,627; and Health Connection 39,800

4.1.7 Information Technology/Web Services

The Customer Service Strategy also provides for improvement in employee access to computers and information and to public access to the Region via its website and through e-government initiatives. The *Citizens First 4* survey reports that citizens use the internet primarily for voluntary information gathering. Staff, also rely on technology to provide accurate, efficient and timely service. Improvements over the past year in this area include:

- Visits to www.york.ca have grown from 1.9 million in 2004 to 3.1 million in 2005
- Information Technology Services upgraded the Disaster Recovery Environment in order to ensure business continuity for our customers in the event of a disaster
- Improved service levels to customers through an upgraded Regional Internet connection, spam solution to reduce unwanted e-mails, and new security protocols to protect sensitive data
- Corporate Communications in partnership with Information Technology Services, successfully re-launched the Intranet improving navigation and functionality
- Implementation of off-board Automated Fare Collections (AFC) for Viva which allows passengers to board the bus in a timely fashion
- Community Services and Housing website was redesigned to be more client focused. The department's monthly average Web page views by the public increased by over 450% from 8,546 to 47,058. The project has also improved business processes by allowing forms to be completed online

- Community Services and Housing made it easier for users to find information in *YorkLink: A Community Services Directory* by improving the index in the written version and enhancing the search function on the online version
- The “Planning for Tomorrow” website has been continuously updated to reflect the ongoing growth management and public engagement process. In April and May of 2006 the website had over 2,100 visits
- The Human Services Planning Branch launched a dynamic website which provides information on the Human Services Planning Coalition and data related to human services in York Region
- Community Services and Housing’s Family and Children’s Services provided a total of 296 hours of training and 1,101 calls of help line assistance to 46 Regional governments and District Social Services Assistance Boards across the province, in support of the Ontario Child Care Management System. York Region has been the leader in developing this technology
- The Employment and Financial Support Branch of Community Services and Housing revised its on-line reference tool used by staff to support OW participants’ employment goals. “Employment Connection” is an internal web-based resource page which includes up-to-date information about support available in the community, including education, training opportunities, and job postings
- To reduce paper, expedite payments and provide enhanced customer service, the Family and Children’s Service Branch implemented a web-based Record of Attendance reporting system for child care operators with a Child Care Fee Assistance Agreement with York Region
- Health Connection implemented a web-based database to facilitate response to client requests and meet professional documentation standards
- Human Resource Services revamped the HR Intranet site with an Employee Resource Centre and a Manager’s Resource Centre
- Finance improved turnaround time for posting information on the external website including: annual budgets, development charges, and the annual report

4.1.8 Property/Facilities

The Customer Service Strategy also provides for improvement of accessibility to Regional facilities and services, including the investigation of opportunities to improve parking and the accessibility and comfort of the Region’s facilities. Initiatives in the past year include:

- Approval of York Region’s first Strategic Accommodation plan, ensuring that staff are located in quality, cost-effective accommodations and customer service delivery is enhanced for the next 5-10 years
- Energy retrofit of the Administrative Centre to reduce consumption. An “Energy User Guide” was distributed to staff to explain the changes and encourage conservation
- York Region Transit implemented a new waste collection and recycling program for transit stops, shelters and terminals
- Renovation of the Promenade Transit Terminal to increase comfort and safety

- New laundry equipment with accessible and ease-of-use equipment was installed in all Housing York Inc. rental properties serving approximately 1,800 households
- Upgraded client centres of the Alternative Community Living (ACL) program sites by installing ramps and washroom facilities
- Five public washrooms in older Housing York Inc. rental properties were renovated to create barrier-free facilities
- Two branches of Finance were re-organized to better accommodate services and space utilization. Name plates were also added to allow easier access to staff
- Approval of a parking plan that supports initiatives such as “Smart Commute” and will increase visitor parking
- Development of Corporate Facility Signage Guidelines in support of accessibility

4.1.9 Accessibility

One of the Region’s main challenges, as outlined in the Customer Service Strategy, is to increase accessibility to its services. This can be done through a variety of means, including extending core business hours, giving the option to reach a “live voice”, and pursuing strategies to support accessibility. Initiatives in these areas are outlined below.

- Community Services and Housing developed an inventory of social housing units for persons with disabilities to enable eligible applicants make informed housing choices
- York Region Transit launched introduced 25 new routes including service to Mount Albert, and seven routes were restructured to increase service levels to customers
- Community Services and Housing released *Community Snapshots: Recent Immigrants Living in York Region* which provides a profile of the fastest growing segment of the Region’s populations - recent immigrants
- The Early Intervention Service Initial Information Package was translated into eight languages in 2006 to better serve families in York Region
- Health Services implemented a nutrition program for Aboriginal women implemented on Georgina Island
- Public Health hired staff with specific cultural/language skills to meet needs of families
- Large print incorporated into *York Works* newsletter and high resolution PDFs put on website to increase accessibility
- The Sutton Youth Shelter was opened to provide temporary shelter and transition support for homeless youth aged 16-26
- Corporate Communications has incorporated accessibility standards into its new business card design, with easier-to-read print
- Community Services and Housing organized one-day sole support workshops for Ontario Works clients, specifically single parents with school-age children. The workshop highlights opportunities regarding child care options, employment opportunities, assistance with family support issues and agency presentations

4.1.10 Service Standards

The Customer Service Strategy contains a number of standards that provide for access to a “live voice” during normal business hours and for timeliness responses to telephone calls, correspondence, e-mail and complaints. Timeliness was highlighted as having the strongest impact on customer service in each of the *Citizens First* surveys. During the first two years of the Strategy, the focus was on communicating the standards to Regional staff and training staff on how to meet and exceed these standards. More emphasis is now being placed on trying to measure and improve response times in order to better serve the customers.

- The Regional Clerk’s Office drafted and forwarded 1,181 after-Council letters within a standard of four days of Regional Council meetings 97.8% of the time, eclipsing the previous five-year high by 5.5%
- Mobility Plus processed 165,000 calls in 2005 and reduced wait times by 13% and abandoned calls by 21%
- Information Technology Services has introduced service level agreements with the Departments to ensure a consistent level of service is provided
- Business Planning and Budgets responded within one business day to 2,500 development charge inquiries
- Transportation and Works implemented the commingled Blue Box program allowing local municipalities to reduce and simplify collection costs
- The Region was recognized in the Information and Privacy Commissioner’s 2005 Annual Report for its excellent timeliness in responding to 84 formal Access and Privacy requests under the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* within the statutory 30-day time period 95.2% of the time
- To date in 2006, Community Planning Staff consulted with landowners, developers, residents and area municipal staff with respect to reviewing, commenting, reporting and issuing decisions for 83 plans of subdivision and condominiums and 26 Regional and local official plan amendments. Process time of all development applications consistently meets the Provincial legislative timelines
- Human Resource Services reduced several steps in the recruitment process and improved the amount of time it took to do job evaluation from 19 business days to 10 business days improving service to both internal and external clients

4.1.11 Program Changes

- The current customer service program was independently reviewed by the Randolph Group on its accomplishments and structure. It was determined that customer service is well routed within the corporate culture of the organization and that the majority of items in the original customer service strategy have been completed
- The focus of the program is now shifting to a more strategic approach that includes program evaluations from a customer service perspective. Areas such as access, surveys, publications, and service standards will be reviewed and long term and short term recommendations and goals will be identified for each line of business

- The customer service program now reports into the Office of the CAO

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The costs of implementing the Customer Service Strategy are contained in the 2006 Business Plan and Budget. They are part of the Region's ongoing initiatives for providing service to its residents and businesses.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Region shares the same customers as local municipalities, and local municipalities themselves are the Region's customers. Improvements to customer service benefit local municipalities and all of our mutual customers.

7. CONCLUSION

Council's adoption of the Customer Service Strategy in 2001 was part of the Region's ongoing commitment to serving its customers. Customer service is established as an integral component of the Region's corporate culture.

There have been a significant number of customer service successes over the past year. These signal the continuing long-term commitment of Council, Senior Management and Regional staff to our primary goal of serving out customers.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.