

10

CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY UPDATE

The Finance and Administration Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, undated, 2003, from the Commissioner of Corporate Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

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 two years, there have been a number of major initiatives that are part of the Region's ongoing commitment to serving its customers. We reported on the first year's initiatives in June 2002. This report covers initiatives that have been undertaken since then.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Major Initiatives

During the past year the Region has undertaken or continued a number of major initiatives designed to improve service to its customers. Included among these are:

- The Region's successful response to the SARS crisis and the recent power outage were based on a strong customer service foundation. The entire resources of the Public Health Branch were required for the SARS emergency. At the height of the emergency, over 1,000 Regional staff members, including 853 from Health Services, were dedicated to assisting the public
- Continued investment in roads, sewer and water infrastructure to address current and future customer needs
- The addition of new buses and bus routes to improve transit service
- Major initiatives to design and implement a rapid transit system
- The closing of the Keele Valley landfill site and use of alternate strategies for the disposal of solid waste
- The creation of Housing York Inc. to provide streamlined operations and the establishment of more housing units
- Additions to the number of emergency response stations and vehicles and the execution of a new deployment plan to enhance emergency medical services

- The creation of an Accessibility Advisory Committee and the development of an annual Accessibility Plan to improve service to customers with disabilities

4.2 Vision 2026

In 2002 Council approved Vision 2026 as a blueprint for the provision of Regional services over the next 25 years. Vision 2026 contains major customer service components. One of its key action areas is “Proactively Meeting the Needs of Our Customers”. Various progress indicators for implementation of Vision 2026 were created over the past year. Many of these have specific customer service components, including:

- Citizen satisfaction rate with Regional government
- Citizen rating of the effectiveness of government services

Vision 2026 and the Customer Service Strategy mutually support the Region’s commitment to excellent customer service.

4.3 Customer Service Strategy Initiatives

There have also been a number of initiatives undertaken in the past year that are directly linked to the Customer Service Strategy adopted by Council in June 2001. Steps continue to be taken towards implementation of all forty recommendations in the Strategy. These will be noted under the major headings contained in the Strategy.

4.3.1 Leadership

The success of the Region’s Customer Service Strategy depends on the continuing and visible support of Council and Senior Management. The commitment of Council and Senior Management has been evident in the approval and implementation of the various initiatives, as well as:

- Continued customer service messaging in communications and speeches by the Regional Chair and CAO
- The continuation of a cross-departmental Customer Service Strategy Team. It currently has 21 members representing the Regional Chair’s Office, the CAO’s Office, the six Regional Departments and York Regional Police
- Council’s creation of an Accessibility Advisory Committee to listen to and address the needs of York Region’s citizens with disabilities. The Region’s proactive approach to implementing the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* has served as a model for other municipalities

4.3.2 Continuous Planning for Improvement

Another tenet of the Customer Service Strategy is that the Region’s ongoing corporate and business processes should incorporate customer service measurements and plans.

- As indicated above, Vision 2026 now incorporates various performance measures relating to customer service

- Various other corporate strategies, including the Human Resources Strategy, the Information Technology Strategy, the Five-Year Telecommunications Plan, and the annual Business Plan and Budget have major customer service components

4.3.3 Customer Voice: Seeking the Customer's Views

Another foundation of the Region's Customer Service Strategy is seeking the customers' views in order to determine the customers' needs. In this way, the Region's services will be based on customers' direct input rather than on perceptions of what the customers need. There have been a number of initiatives in this area over the past year. Included are the following:

- The Region's participation for the first time in the *Citizens First 3* survey of citizens' ratings of public sector services
- The 2002 Environics survey commissioned by the Planning and Development Services Department again included a strong customer service component and a specific question on preferred methods of accessing information about the Region's programs and services
- Customer Service Survey cards are now in place at key Regional customer service counters

Various Departments have conducted customer surveys, meetings and focus groups to obtain customer feedback on specific services. A few examples follow.

- The first 3000 copies of *YorkLink 2003* included a postage paid survey card for users to provide feedback
- The Geomatics Branch randomly contacts internal and external customers on a weekly basis to conduct customer satisfaction surveys
- York Region Transit completed its first annual customer satisfaction surveys for both conventional and specialized transit
- Legal Services, Community Services and Housing and Finance (Accounts Payable) have conducted surveys of their staff and other internal customers
- Court Services conducted a customer satisfaction survey to compare levels of services received before and after downloading from the Province
- Community Services and Housing conducted customer satisfaction surveys for Child Care Fee Assistance, the National Benefit Summer Camp Program, Early Intervention Service and Ontario Works. The Department also issues customer satisfaction surveys, reply cards and exit questionnaires to Social Housing residents on an ongoing basis
- Health Services has begun to conduct a Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (RRFSS). This is a monthly telephone survey of York Region adults regarding knowledge and awareness of health-related conditions and issues and of the programs and services offered by the Health Services Department. The information will also assist in the planning and targeting of programs
- Health Services has implemented survey strategies relating to its Early Child Development, Prenatal, Child Health, Long Term Care and Seniors programs

Customer feedback is always analysed to determine whether Regional programs and services are meeting customer needs.

4.3.4 Staff Development

Another element of the Region's Customer Service Strategy is 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.

- Human Resource Services has trained over 1,600 Regional staff in customer service over the past year
- Human Resource Services provided a total of 4,700 learning opportunities to Regional employees in 2002
- Customer services focus is a key component of all annual performance appraisals for non-union employees
- All job postings include a requirement for customer focus and all job interviews include one or more questions about customer focus
- "Know York" sessions were created to help staff understand different areas of the Region's business to better serve our customers
- Human Resource Services has developed and distributed an employee handbook to give employees easy access to information about the Region
- Community Services and Housing developed a Child Care Services Training Manual, and provided training for housing providers, information sessions for Ontario Works community partners and funding for front-line training for the Early Years Programs
- 95% of Health Service's Healthy Babies, Healthy Children staff were trained in best practices for identifying and supporting families experiencing and/or at risk for Postpartum Mood Disorder
- The "Proton" food handlers course instituted by Health Services led to the certification of 1,500 York Region food handlers in 2002
- Health Services has also provided the Long Term Care and Seniors Branch staff with "U-First" training that provides non-regulated caregivers with an opportunity to network and learn a common language to assist in co-ordinated client care planning
- The Region's "Commitment to Excellence" program continues to recognize outstanding customer service
- All staff have access to an internal customer service hotline and e-mail as a coaching and suggestion resource

4.3.5 External Communications

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. Initiatives undertaken in the past year include:

- Three issues of *York Works* were mailed directly to each household in the Region
- York Region's Customer Service Strategy was featured in a *Municipal World* article
- The Community Services and Housing *Ontario Works Participant Handbook* was posted as a best practice on the Ministry of Community, Family and Children's Services web site

- Community Services and Housing developed a *Child Care Chit Chat Newsletter*, and Early Intervention Services accomplishments were published in the Ontario Association for Infant Development newsletter
- Community Services and Housing created a Homelessness Information Card which provides housing options and services for the homeless
- Health Services conducted various Community Forums including public sessions on the West Nile Virus and SARS
- The Region raised the profile of affordable housing, urban planning and transit initiatives in Regional and GTA media
- Corporate Communications launched a “*Who Does What?*” public relations campaign (Rogers/Metroland/Corporate Display)
- The *Health Status Report: A Measure of Health*, was released this spring and made available to the public through the Information Kiosk and the Regional website. Among other things, it contains a wealth of helpful health tips for physicians and their patients.
- Health Services conducted two Hype-it forums to help youth promote the elimination of tobacco with 105 participants leading to the creation of 20 student action committees
- Since October 2002 the Human Services Planning Branch has held six inFORUM YORK sessions attended by about 300 people. These sessions were taped by Rogers Cable and have been aired in both York Region and in various areas throughout the Province.

4.3.6 Telephones/Telecommunications

One of the biggest frustrations customers have identified with public and private sector service delivery is in the use of telephones and voice mail. The *Citizens First 3* survey showed that most citizens still prefer to contact Government by phone. It also showed that problems with telephone service delivery (e.g. voice mail, busy lines, the “bounce effect”) continue to affect public sector service delivery in much the same manner as they affect the private sector.

The Regional Administrative Centre switchboard, the Health Connection line, the Community Services and Housing “KIDSLINE” and the Information Kiosk collectively answer over 125,000 telephone calls a year. The Health Connection line received 49,965 calls in 2002 -- an increase of 21% from 2001. During the SARS emergency, 26,291 calls were received from March 26, 2003 to June 16, 2003. The need to strengthen the Region’s phone system and its use was identified as a priority in the Customer Service Strategy. Initiatives taken in this area have included:

- Finance recently brought forward a Five-Year Telecommunications Strategy that is geared to improving various aspects of telephone service delivery at the Region. Specific initiatives designed to improve staff use of the Region’s telephone technology are in the planning stages for next year
- Unified Messaging has been made available to employees working in the Administrative Centre, South Services Centre and the Tannery. This service provides staff with the ability to manage all voice, e-fax and e-mail messages from their PC or a touch tone phone

- Human Resource Services through its departmental Customer Service Team, regularly e-mails its staff with telephone and e-mail tips to help improve service
- Toll free calling to the Region from locations throughout North America has recently been made available. This service will enable North American customers, primarily for economic development, to contact the Region toll free
- The Health Protection Division established a Safe Water Line to respond to reports of adverse drinking water quality from regulated drinking water systems and well water users. An average of 20 calls a day is received on this line

4.3.7 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 web site and through e-government initiatives. Improvements over the past year in this area include:

- The Region's website was re-designed to be more user-friendly in accordance with suggestions received in an on-line survey
- The implementation of a pilot project for an electronic document management system in Clerk's and Legal Services gave staff the ability to respond to customers' information requests much more quickly than under paper-based systems
- A database was created to allow SARS clinic information and follow-up information to be tracked and followed-up by Health Services and Community Services and Housing staff. It also provided information to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and other municipalities
- Community Services and Housing implemented an Ontario Works intranet website for Social Assistance staff including on-line policies and links to community and government resources
- The Community Services and Housing Department also developed and released an enhanced version of the Ontario Child Care Management System to 40 Consolidated Municipal Service Managers
- Community Services and Housing revamped the *YorkLink* website. Improvements included improved speed of download, printer-friendly agency listings and the addition of a volunteer section
- *York Beat* was created as an online centralized location for staff to access Regional news, Public Service Announcements and media releases
- The public can now report dead bird sightings on-line to support West Nile virus surveillance activities

4.3.8 Property/Facilities

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

- Renovation of the Prospect Street office to allow for increased accessibility, such as the installation of ramps and accessible washroom facilities

- A new parking policy has been put into place at the Regional Administrative Centre to ensure that more parking spots are available to the public
- In the Long Term Care and Seniors Branch, phase 3 construction/renovations were initiated. These will result in 58 new supportive housing units, additional public health offices and psychogeriatric/long term care outreach offices
- Emergency Medical Services established permanent stations in Markham and Vaughan and a paramedic response unit on Cane Parkway
- Property and Planning and Development Services collaborated on the establishment of a Business Enterprise Centre to assist small businesses in York Region

4.3.9 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" outlined above and pursuing strategies to support accessibility in languages other than English. Initiatives in these areas are outlined below:

- A *Language Line Service* was made available to all departments allowing staff instant access to language translators to assist customers
- Human Resource Services increased access to job postings through the creation of a telephone job line and the Regional website
- The Region's website is now accessible to the visually impaired
- Access to information was provided through the Food Premise Disclosure System allowing the public to call or e-mail to obtain up-to-date information on the last inspection of a food premise
- Chinese and Italian Tobacco Campaign: As a recipient of Provincial funding, Health Services conducted a pre-survey of Italian and Chinese communities to determine their needs with respect to tobacco awareness and education
- Food handling workshops were available in English, Cantonese and Italian
- The lay health-educator Breast Health Project provided 50 educational workshops to more than 600 Chinese women, and the Cervical Health Project provided 24 workshops to almost 400 Chinese women in their own language
- During the SARS outbreak and the recent power outage, hours of operation and the number of phone lines into the call centre were increased to promote accessibility
- Due to improvements in court scheduling practices, significant additional court time was made available for customers to attend court
- New transit routes were created in the Keswick area of Georgina and the Holland Landing and Sharon areas of East Gwillimbury to reach more customers

4.3.10 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 the timeliness of responses to telephone calls, correspondence, e-mail and complaints. Timeliness was highlighted as a major customer need in the recent *Citizens First 3* survey. The service standards are being reviewed in the context of the feedback received in *Citizens First 3*.

During the first year of the Strategy, the focus was on communicating the standards to Regional staff. During the past year, the focus was on training staff on how to meet and exceed these standards. More emphasis is now being placed on trying to improve response times in order to better serve the customers.

- To date, 1,600 Regional staff have been trained the Region's customer service standards as part of their customer service training
- Departmental Customer Service Implementation teams are now in place to continue to raise awareness of the Customer Service Strategy and liaise with the Customer Service Strategy Team to provide feedback and create ongoing dialog about the Region's service standards
- Due to improvements in court scheduling practices and the opening of the additional court facility in Richmond Hill, the waiting time for trials was reduced from 10 months (January 2002) to 7 months (December 2002)
- The average response time for EMS vehicles was cut from 11:49 to 11:24 (3.5%)
- Planning and Development Services has reduced the average turnaround time for major amendments from 80 to 55 days
- Four departments have adopted a "daily voice mail" update protocol

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The costs of implementing the Customer Service Strategy are contained in the 2003 Business Plan and Budget. They are part of the Region's ongoing way of doing business.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Region shares the same customers as local municipalities. Local municipalities 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. It has paved the way for various initiatives that follow the blueprint of the Strategy. There has 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 our customers.

This report has been reviewed by the Senior Management Group.