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CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY UPDATE

The Finance and Administration Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report, October 11, 2005, from the Commissioner of Corporate Services:

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 four 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. We have noted about 280 initiatives in the first three reports. This is out of a much larger selection provided by the Region's departments. This report highlights a number of initiatives from June 2004 to June, 2005.

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 over 900,000 residents, its businesses and other customers. Included among these are:

- Council continued its major investment in infrastructure by approving about \$900 million in capital expenditures in the 2005 Business Plan and Budget. About 94% of this is dedicated to transit, roads, solid waste, water and wastewater
- Major groundwork for the provision of rapid transit services beginning September 2005 to the Region's customers, including the acquisition of 85 Viva vehicles
- Acquisition of 12 conventional and three specialized low-floor vehicles to improve access to the Region's transit services
- Opening of the Bales Drive Material Recycling and Waste Transfer Facility that will process 90,000 tonnes of customers' blue box material per year
- A number of major environmental protection initiatives including approval of the Greening Strategy Regional Securement Criteria, the Oak Ridges Moraine

- Conservation Plan Conformity Amendment and consultation and approval in principle of the GTA Agricultural Action Plan
- Continued environmental focus to meet customers' needs such as the planting of 55,000 trees in 2004, implementing a household source separated organic waste pilot in Markham and approving the addition of No. 3 – 7 plastics to the blue box program
 - The purchase of two more ambulances, bringing the Region's total to 26 ambulances and six Paramedic Response Units
 - Opening Armitage Gardens in Newmarket, providing access to 58 more seniors' housing units and long term care supportive housing in 26 of these units

4.2 Customer Service Strategy Initiatives

There have also been a number of initiatives undertaken in the past year that support the Customer Service Strategy adopted by Council in June 2001. These will be noted under the Strategy's ten major components.

4.2.1 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:

- Council's approval and staff implementation of various infrastructure, program and service initiatives
- Approval of a new servicing protocol and a restructuring in the Planning and Development Services and Transportation and Works Departments to provide "one-stop shopping" for growth management and infrastructure needs
- Approval of the Region's Information Technology Strategy, a five-year plan that is geared to supporting Regional service delivery goals
- Approval of "Moving Forward", the Region's annual Accessibility Plan that improves access to the Region's services for customers with disabilities. The Region's accessibility planning and process have been recognized as a best practice by the Province
- Continued customer service messaging in communications and speeches by the Regional Chair and CAO

4.2.2 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.

- Vision 2026 provides a framework for Regional initiatives in various areas. It contains a key action area entitled "Proactively Meeting the Needs of Our Customers" and a number of performance measures relating to customer service
- Likewise, the annual Business Plan and Budget now 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 and departmental implementation teams. The Customer Service Strategy Team currently has 17 members representing the Regional Chair's Office, the CAO's Office, the six Regional Departments and York Regional Police
 - Planning and development of action plans to respond to the Region's extensive employee satisfaction survey and to achieve greater organizational performance
 - Continued implementation of Social Marketing planning and tracking by Corporate Communications to help differentiate services offered by the Region and the local municipalities to our joint customers and to increase "brand" awareness
 - A monthly CAO's Newsletter and CAO's Corner in the Region's internal newsletter provides more accessibility to staff and a further opportunity to bring suggestions for future planning and initiatives to the CAO's attention
 - Community Services and Housing partnered with Planning and Development Services to develop reports on how the Region's housing, employment and labour force are related to the strength of its economy, thereby helping to plan for future housing and economic strategies
 - Various departments continued to engage in emergency planning, with coordination and leadership from the Emergency Management division, to protect the Region's citizens and businesses. The Region's efforts were recently recognized by the Province of Ontario
 - Finance planned and improved its claims follow-up process for claims involving outside contractors to ensure faster payment response times for the Region's customers

4.2.3 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 four years. Initiatives in this area over the past year include the following:

- Community Services and Housing engaged in a number of surveys and consultations, including an annual satisfaction survey of recipients of child care fee assistance, a mail out survey to Early Intervention Services clients' families (current, prospective and exiting), a public consultation session to discuss the themes of the Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan, consultations with domiciliary hostel operators in the development of the *Domiciliary Hostel Handbook*, Quality of Life Initiatives, and the Lodging Houses By-Law, an interactive survey on the *YorkLink* web site and telephone surveys to gather feedback from customers with disabilities regarding barriers in the Ontario Works application process
- Corporate Services conducted the organization-wide Employee Satisfaction survey in 2003 and various Regional staff teams have continued to plan and act on its results

- Corporate Services' Human Resource Services and Legal Services branches conducted surveys of internal customers using the *Common Measurement Tool* (CMT). The CMT is used by various other public sector organizations and assists with common questions and benchmarking between public service organizations
- Financial Services conducted end-user workshops and its Purchasing section conducted two customer service surveys
- Health Services conducted surveys of its long term care facilities clients (with a 100% rating of good/excellent) and its *Safewater and Sunsense* staff surveyed users of De la Salle Beach in Georgina for sun and water safety awareness with program changes being made as a result
- The Human Services Planning Coalition established a multi-sector action group to lead a community-wide consultation process to develop an ethno-cultural *Inclusivity Action Plan*, with a goal to increase capacity to welcome and integrate immigrants into the Region
- Planning staff continued to engage in extensive community consultation for initiatives such as the development of the Economic Strategy and the Regional Centres and Regional Corridors Amendment (ROPA 43)
- Rapid Transit conducted ongoing meetings with various stakeholder groups including environmentalists, heritage groups, realtors and developers
- Transit continued to conduct customer satisfaction surveys for both conventional and specialized transit
- Transportation and Works scheduled pre-construction public consultation sessions for key infrastructure projects and solicited input from residents in its *York Works* newsletter

4.2.4 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.

- Community Services and Housing partnered with Corporate Services and Communications to raise staff awareness on the needs of persons with disabilities with activities, resources, tools, customer service tips, articles and training sessions
- Community Services and Housing's Learning and Development Services Unit provided Department staff with 186 different courses and 332 sessions, an average of 41 training hours per staff on various topics
- Corporate Communications rebuilt and re-branded *York Beat*, developed a *Know York* series for staff to learn about various Regional departments and services and continued to circulate daily media clippings for easier and extended staff accessibility to information
- Corporate Services implemented a self-serve electronic Corporate Learning Registration System (CLRS) to help staff actively manage their learning file. It also developed and implemented a human resources newsletter and telephone skills

training as well as a new Employee Orientation package for new employees and students

- Corporate Services also completed customer service training for 261 staff. 1,918 York Region staff have received customer service training since this program started in late 2002
- Corporate Services provided more than 400 learning opportunities in records and information management to Regional staff, including a new session geared to management awareness and managing electronic records and information to improve customer service.
- Customer Service remains a Core Competency that is rated in all annual employee performance appraisals
- Finance provided “Business Case” and “Risk Aware” development seminars for Regional staff and area municipal risk management staff
- Health Services continued training of Regional staff in the *Heart Alive* program, with more than 390 employees trained through 34 targeted responder courses
- Health Services developed an “Energize your Workplace Kit” to promote physical activity in York Region workplaces
- Health Services held workshops on sexuality and gender diversity for 223 York Region District School Board Staff, and trained 127 volunteers on the “Inn from the Cold” program to prevent infectious diseases in temporary shelters
- Rapid Transit instituted the “Viva University” and “Viva Ambassador” driver training
- Transportation and Works implemented performance appraisals for its Infrastructure Design and Construction unionized staff

4.2.5 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 and to foster community partnerships. Initiatives undertaken in the past year include:

- Staff from various Regional Departments participated in well over 200 community events, public relations and education initiatives
- Corporate Communications produced large numbers of media releases, Community Calendar listings and public service announcements on the Region’s internet and intranet, responded to extensive requests from the media for information and access to Regional spokespeople, monitored and measured media reports and developed a new corporate overview presentation for visiting delegations
- Corporate Communications created several full-page advertisements in Metroland newspapers, highlighting various Regional services and the annual Business Plan and Budget.
- Corporate Communications led the featuring of the Regional Administrative Centre in “Doors Open Newmarket”
- Community Services and Housing co-hosted a public forum on Bill 118, *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2004* (AODA), in partnership with the Region’s

- Accessibility Advisory Committee and a “Keeping YorKids Safe Home Safety Workshop” to increase parents awareness of injury prevention and safety in the home
- Community Services and Housing made a presentation to editorial staff and a community board formed by the *Era Banner* regarding housing needs in the Region
 - Health Services expanded circulation of the Seniors Resource Directory to include all Regional households, provided over 11,000 food premise inspections and consultations, hosted a “Family Safety Day” to teach children how to play safe, and “EMS Preparedness Week” with media events and displays highlighting EMS activities
 - Planning and Development Services continued wide circulation of the *Visitors Guide* that contains 64 pages of Regional event listings, accommodations and attractions
 - Planning and Development Services’ Small Business Enterprise Centre organized 12 seminars, provided 72 presentations, 250 consultations and responded to over 3,670 enquiries in 2004
 - Planning and Development Services presented its award-winning *Housing and Our Economy, Remaining Competitive* report at various forums throughout the GTA
 - Rapid Transit continued implementation of the Viva Marketing and Communications Plan, including the Viva brand launch in December 2004, to educate residents and businesses on the benefits of rapid transit
 - Transit had a vehicle presence at numerous community events including the Aurora Street Festival, Markham Canada Day parade, Unionville Parade, Taste of Asia, Woodbridge Italian Festival, Richmond Hill Heritage Village day and Newmarket Chamber of Commerce event
 - Transportation and Works celebrated National Public Works Week with a “Family Fun Day” and hosted student tours of works facilities
 - Transportation and Works promoted composting and kraft paper bags for yard waste with new educational guides for residents and businesses. Follow-up surveys indicate over 90% public awareness of this program.
 - Transportation and Works prepared a Transportation Fact Book highlighting the Region’s transportation system, distributed two issues of *York Works* to all Regional households and two issues of *At Your Service* to households in King Township, and placed a double page ad in local newspapers containing information on major infrastructure projects

4.2.6 Telephones/Telecommunications

The telephone continues to be the most convenient way for the Region’s customers to access Regional information and services. The *Citizens First* surveys conducted over the past six years have shown 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 and the “bounce effect”) continue to affect public sector service delivery in much the same manner as they affect the private sector.

- Call centres across York Region continued to experience large call volumes, with the following numbers for 2004: Transit 128,776; Community Services and Housing 117,118; and Health Connection 44,732
- Corporate Services instituted a Job Line to enable customers to access postings by telephone
- Health Services implemented a TTY line for hearing-impaired clients calling Health Connection
- Health Services integrated the Sexual Health Line with the Health Connection line to reduce client waiting time
- Emergency Medical Services staff implemented an Interactive Voice Recognition system (IVR) to support effective scheduling of staff resources and service to the Region's residents
- Corporate Services and Information technology Services developed a Voicemail "Quick Tips" card that was given to staff upon completion of Telephone Training
- Information Technology Services internal "Help Desk" improved first- contact resolution of staff concerns from 50% in August 2004 to 70% by February 2005
- Transportation and Works provided a 24-hour complaint hotline on key infrastructure projects

4.2.7 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. Recent surveys show that more customers are choosing the internet as the channel by which to access government information. The Information Technology Strategy approved by Council contains 32 different information technology initiatives designed to improve customer service. Improvements over the past year in this area include:

- Community Services and Housing developed its "Infosource" database, an information and referral aid for staff which enables staff to provide better service to their clients and redesigned its website pages to be more user-friendly
- Community Services and Housing implemented an accessible computer workstation in its Georgina Social Assistance office for people with disabilities
- Health Services' electronic booking system for clients attending breastfeeding clinics helped increase client volume and reduced waiting time
- Health participated in the development of iPHIS- an electronic program for the improvement of infectious diseases management in the community
- The Character Community and Kids Zone web pages were updated with revised navigation
- Corporate Communications rebuilt and re-branded the internal staff publication *York Beat* for access to information
- Finance's Print Shop software was upgraded to comply with *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* standards

- Information Technology Services hosted “Information Technology Day” to showcase advancements in technology with the Region’s partners and local municipalities
- Planning and Development Services’ *York Explorer* internet mapping services were updated with new views and tools to access high quality maps. In the first six months of 2005 over 208,000 maps were viewed and 12,900 maps were downloaded.
- Intelligent Transportation Systems were installed at Viva bus stops in anticipation of the beginning of service in September 2005 to provide the estimated arrival time of the next bus
- Viva created a new web site- www.vivayork.ca to provide information on the Region’s rapid transit initiative

4.2.8 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:

- Community Services and Housing incorporated accessibility standards into the design of a 60 unit seniors apartment building being developed in Vaughan, including 3 fully wheelchair accessible units, mobility access to all public areas and entrances to suites
- Community Services and Housing’s Early Intervention Services Unit created a Sensory Integration Therapy room, also known as a Snoezelen room, in the Markham office to better serve children with multiple sensory needs such as hearing and visual impairments, and physical and neurological conditions
- Community Services and Housing completed renovation to enlarge and enhance client and staff areas of three EIS offices in Markham, Newmarket and Woodbridge
- Automatic doors were installed at the Prospect Street location of Health
- Purchasing upgraded software in the Print Shop to comply with ODA standards to provide an enhanced service to Regional departments
- The Vaughan Community Services and Housing office began renovations to improve the reception area and the Employment Resource Centre for clients

4.2.9 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:

- In partnership with the Salvation Army, Community Services and Housing designed a youth homelessness shelter and transitional housing facility which will be completed in 2005
- Community Services and Housing funded an emergency shelter program in Newmarket, “Inn from the Cold”

- Community Services and Housing introduced a Mental Health Resource Model to help clients with diagnosed and suspected mental health issues take full advantage of employment services and support
- Community Services and Housing provided parenting events to new immigrants in a number of languages
- Community Services and Housing reviewed their web pages using auditing software ensured online information could be accessed by people with visual disabilities
- Community Services and Housing produced and distributed accessible versions of *Moving Forward*, York Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan, including a large-print versions, copies on CD, and a PDF version on the Region's website
- Corporate Services began a signage study with a specific *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* component to review sign location, height, contrast, type, size, texture, colour and shape
- Human Resource Services implemented a self-service job board in the Regional Administrative Centre
- Health Services delivered a Falls Prevention ad, geared to seniors via Toronto Chinese radio to an audience of 200,000
- Transit's specialized transit call centre expanded its hours to match conventional transit's hours of operation
- All Viva vehicles were designed to be wheelchair accessible

4.2.10 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 most recent *Citizens First* survey. During the first two years of the Strategy, the focus was on communicating the standards to Regional staff and 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.

- The Policy Risk and Treasury branch of Finance improved follow-up process for claims involving outside contractors to ensure ratepayers/claimants are responded to in a timely fashion are being drafted
- Finance's Business Planning and Budgets responded to over 1,500 customer inquiries within one business day
- "Sorry for your inconvenience" vouchers will be used when people are kept waiting for longer than 15 minutes in Human Resource Services
- High-level customer service targets are being established, tracked and monitored as part of the Region's Key Performance Indicators
- The Region is a key participant in the Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative's (OMBI's) customer service panel that is seeking to establish key performance indicators and benchmarks for day-to-day customer service transactions

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The costs of implementing the customer service strategy are contained in the 2005 business plan and budget. They are part of the region's ongoing way of providing service to its residents and businesses.

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. 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 our customers.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.