

SUMMARY OF SQUAMISH WLNG ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

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The community of Squamish lies at the north end of Howe Sound, halfway between Vancouver and Whistler. In 2013, the District of Squamish received two referrals from the Province of British Columbia's Environmental Assessment Office (EAO) regarding Environmental Assessment (EA) applications, one for the Woodfibre Liquefied Natural Gas (WLNG) project, and one for Fortis BC's Eagle Mountain Project.

The District (DoS) began its review of these two EA applications by considering the community's vision and the principles and commitments that are set out in its Official Community Plan. To help assess various technical aspects of the proposed projects, DoS struck a Community Committee which met for 8 months before reporting to Council.

In March 2015, DoS contracted Modus Planning, Design and Engagement to work with District staff to undertake a focused engagement process to understand the community's opinions and values on these proposed projects and to inform council discussion. Engagement success was defined as:

- Useful input being gathered from the greatest number of residents;
- An opportunity for everyone to be heard;
- Respectful dialogue and reduction of conflict;
- Thoughtful discussion of our shared future to inform Council discussions.

Between March 9 and 23, 2015 the District asked the community to "Speak, Listen and Learn"—to engage in a dialogue about the proposed projects and the best possible outcomes for Squamish. This branding and messaging was chosen to reflect the fact that Council wished to hear all voices in the community, but did not want conflict over the project to increase.



Council's objective to hear from the greatest number of residents and avoid further divisions between residents led to this process of engagement being chosen over a statistically-valid random-sample survey. It was thus important that this engagement process have a strong element of dialogue.

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Activities planned and executed over a six week period included:

- **Informal conversations** with a range of community groups and individuals (15 in total) who were seen as 'key community influencers', including a range of known opposers, supporters, and neutral parties. Attendees were asked to share their ideas and feelings, briefed on the engagement activities and objectives, and asked to promote input as widely as possible.

- **An online discussion forum (PlaceSpeak)** available for 14 days. A total of 36 comments were received through this forum from a total of 13 individual respondents. The discussion was viewed by 437 people (unique IP addresses).
- **A public questionnaire** available in online and paper formats for 14 days. A total of 517 individual responses were received (total includes partial completions).
- **A dialogue-based community event** attended by approximately 90 people.

These activities were promoted extensively and in advance through a wide range of communications channels including: The District of Squamish website and e-news group, newspaper and radio advertising, social media shares and promoted posts, posters and direct e-mails.

In order to provide useful feedback for Council as well as the Environmental Assessment Office, seven “pillars” or discussion topics were used to organize the engagement process :

1. Environmental – Water
2. Environmental – Air & Land
3. Environmental – Broader
4. Economic
5. Social
6. Heritage
7. Health

Using these seven discussion topics and the concept of dialogue as a guiding framework, several key questions were asked to obtain feedback on the community’s opinions and values.

The online discussion forum asked:

- If the project goes ahead, how can we make it the best possible project for Squamish?
- If the project does not go ahead, how do we build up Squamish to be the best it can be?
- What issues or values should Council consider as it develops a response on these projects?

The online public questionnaire was built after the Modus team identified the main issues (both concerns and benefits) that had arisen from research, previous public comments to the Environmental Assessment Office, and the work of the District’s Community Committee.

- Questionnaire participants were asked to review the main issues for each topic and select up to three issues that they felt were the most significant for Squamish.
- Participants were also asked to respond to open-ended questions under each topic:
 - “What are the most important facts Council should consider about this topic and why?”
 - “What does Council need to know about your feelings/values on this topic?”
- Lastly, participants were asked to provide general comments about any concerns or benefits they felt the projects may bring to Squamish.

The dialogue-based public event involved an opening presentation laying out the objectives of the project, describing principles of dialogue, and summarizing issues that had arisen to date. Participants then self-organized into three rounds of small group discussion of 40 minutes each.

- During the first two rounds of discussion, participants were asked to choose a table that focused on a topic of their choice (based on the seven discussion topics listed above), and were asked: “What must Council know about this theme and what matters most to me?”
- The third and final round of discussion asked: “Putting aside whether these projects go ahead or not, what is the best future for Squamish?”

The focus of the forum was to ensure that all attendees had a chance to speak, that people listened to each other, and that there were learnings from the discussions. Reaching consensus was not a goal.

RESULTS

The community’s feedback on these projects was mixed; there were those who strongly supported the tax revenue, jobs and other benefits, and those who strongly opposed the project due to environmental, community and economic concerns. There were also those who felt conflicted.

The community consultation process was not a formal referendum and was never presented as such. Nevertheless, some general themes and leanings emerged. Of respondents’ top 10 concerns, 8 concerned possible harmful impacts on the health of the ecosystem and/or humans, 1 concerned the negative impact on the local tourism industry, and 1 concerned the uncertain capacity of government agencies to successfully monitor, enforce, and respond to issues.

The consultation process helped bring community members together and identify what was truly important to them. It also highlighted the need for more extensive (and earlier) community consultation, respectful dialogue, and collaboration to create the best possible future for Squamish.

“ ...we may have differing opinions but we can still exist as a community ”

The community consultation process had a significant impact on the DoS’s formal submission to the BC EAO. The letter’s 18 detailed requests to the EAO included strong suggestions for addressing the project’s environmental impacts, strengthening government regulatory capacity, and improving the EA consultation process. In the end, the DoS did not support the two EA applications.