

Business Licence By-law Review

“What We Heard” Report

Executive Summary

The City’s Economic Opportunities, Investments and Partnerships Division is leading the review and modernization of the Business Licence By-law to better align with current business practices, administrative processes, community needs, and other recently updated municipal By-laws and territorial legislation. The review is intended to create a clearer, more flexible, and less duplicative licensing framework that supports business growth while improving how licensing services are delivered across the organization. Engagement activities were conducted with businesses, stakeholders, and internal staff to better understand experiences with the current system and identify opportunities for modernization.

Participants shared a range of perspectives related to clarity of information, accessibility, application requirements, and overall user experience. Feedback also highlighted experiences navigating licensing requirements when starting, operating, or expanding a business in Yellowknife. Engagement activities included 26 public survey responses, six one-on-one stakeholder meetings, and one participant at the public engagement session held in Council Chambers. The City also worked directly with five internal departments involved in the business licensing process, including Legal, Planning and Development, Building Services, Municipal Enforcement, and Financial Services.

Overall, participants generally did not identify the existence of business licensing itself as a concern. Instead, feedback focused primarily on opportunities to modernize the by-law, simplify requirements, improve clarity, and better align the licensing framework with current business practices.

Through engagement, participants also identified that many challenges experienced within the licensing system relate to administrative processes, communication, internal coordination, and application workflows surrounding the By-law rather than the By-law alone. These findings highlighted opportunities to improve both the Business Licence By-law and the processes that support its administration.

The perspectives gathered through this engagement will help inform the development of a modernized Business Licence By-law that is practical, flexible, easier to administer, and supportive of business activity in Yellowknife.

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1. Background

The City of Yellowknife is reviewing and updating its Business Licence By-law to assess how it aligns with current business practices and administrative processes. Originally adopted in 1990, the By-law has not been comprehensively updated to reflect changes in technology, business models, and regulatory environments.

Recognizing that northern communities have unique needs compared to larger southern jurisdictions, the City is committed to creating a licensing framework that is practical, clear, flexible, and supportive of business success.

Economic reconciliation is a core consideration in this review. Indigenous peoples and Indigenous-owned businesses are an important and growing part of Yellowknife's economy. A business licensing framework that is clear, accessible, and easy to navigate supports Indigenous entrepreneurs and development corporations in participating fully in the local economy. The City is committed to ensuring the updated By-law reflects this.

The review also provides an opportunity to examine how the current licensing system functions in practice and how supporting administrative processes may be improved.

2. Purpose of Engagement

The engagement aimed to gather feedback from businesses, stakeholders, and internal staff on what should be reflected in a modernized Business Licence By-law, including:

- What requirements, rules, and provisions should be included in the updated By-law;

- How the updated By-law can better reflect reconciliation efforts and support engagement with Indigenous governments and organizations on business and economic development matters;
 - How the By-law can better reflect current business practices and community needs;
 - What areas of the current By-law are outdated, unclear, or no longer necessary;
 - Where there are gaps, duplication, or inconsistencies in the existing framework;
 - How business licensing requirements should be structured to support clarity, fairness, and ease of understanding; and
 - How the By-law can be simplified and modernized to better align with other municipal By-laws and applicable territorial legislation.
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3. Engagement Approach

The engagement process was designed to capture a range of perspectives from external stakeholders and internal City staff. Multiple outreach methods were used to support awareness of the engagement and provide opportunities to participate:

- **Targeted Stakeholder Outreach:** External stakeholders were contacted by email and invited to participate in one-on-one meetings to share detailed feedback and perspectives.
- **Public Engagement Session:** An in-person public engagement session was held in Council Chambers, providing an additional opportunity for participants to share feedback and ask questions.
- **Online Survey Promotion:** A public survey was made available and promoted through the City's social media channels to support broad community participation.
- **Internal Staff Engagement:** City staff were invited by email to participate in the engagement, with outreach directed to departments involved in or connected to the business licensing process. Additional in-person discussions were also held with departments involved in the administration and review of business licence applications to better understand operational workflows and internal processes.

Engagement Method	Participants	Format
One-on-one stakeholder interviews	6 organizations	In-person / written submissions
Public engagement session	1 attendee	In-person, Council Chambers
Online public survey	26 respondents	Online survey
Internal City staff sessions	Multiple staff across 5 departments	In-person and written

These approaches provided multiple opportunities for participants to share input in a variety of formats.

4. Who We Heard From

Engagement captured feedback from a range of participants to provide a broad understanding of experiences with the business licensing process:

- **Local business owners and entrepreneurs:** 26 individuals participated in the public survey. One individual attended the in-person meeting held in Council Chambers.
- **Business support organizations, Indigenous Development Corporations and financial institutions:** Organizations provided input related to business development and support services.
- **Internal City staff:** Staff from Customer Service/Financial Services, Planning and Development, Municipal Enforcement, Legal, Lands and Building Services participated in the engagement.

Stakeholder organizations that participated in one-on-one interviews or submitted written feedback included:

- Prosper NWT
- Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce
- Territorial Agrifood Association
- NWT Tourism

- Tłıchq
- YKDFN

Stakeholder interviews and the public engagement session were structured around six discussion questions:

1. In the past 12 months, have you referenced or used the current Business Licence By-law?
2. How confident are you in your understanding of the current licensing process?
3. How well does the current licensing system meet the needs of your business or organization?
4. What aspects of the current licensing system work well for you or your organization?
5. Have you experienced or observed any challenges, delays, or barriers when applying for or renewing a Business Licence?
6. Which areas of the By-law or licensing process could be improved?

Internal City staff who participated represented Customer Service and Financial Services, Planning and Development, Municipal Enforcement, Legal Services, and Lands and Building Services.

Note on participation: The public engagement session held in Council Chambers drew one attendee. The online survey received 26 responses. While these numbers are modest, the one-on-one stakeholder interviews and internal staff sessions produced substantive, detailed feedback that is well-represented in the findings below.

5. What We Heard

Engagement feedback primarily focused on how the Business Licence By-law could be modernized, clarified, and updated to better reflect current business practices, regulatory expectations, and community needs. Participants generally did not identify the existing By-law as fundamentally problematic; rather, feedback emphasized opportunities to refresh and strengthen the By-law framework itself to improve clarity, consistency, and alignment with other municipal and territorial requirements.

While participants also commented on how the licensing system operates in practice, these observations were largely connected to identifying where the By-law could be clarified, simplified, or updated.

The following sections summarize the perspectives shared during engagement activities:

a) Modernization of the By-law

- Most participants identified opportunities to modernize and simplify the Business Licence By-law to better reflect current business models and operating environments.
 - Feedback highlighted the need for clearer, more straightforward requirements that are easier to interpret and apply consistently.
 - Some staff noted portions of the By-law may be overly detailed, outdated, or better suited to a more flexible, principle-based framework.
 - Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring the By-law remains adaptable and can evolve with changing business practices without frequent major revisions.
 - Opportunities were identified to better align the By-law with other municipal By-laws and applicable territorial legislation to reduce duplication and improve consistency.
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b) Clarity, Structure, and Requirements of the By-law

- Participants identified a need for clearer articulation of licensing requirements within the By-law itself.
- Some feedback highlighted inconsistencies or ambiguity in how requirements are defined or applied.
- Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring requirements are understandable from the outset, particularly for new businesses.
- Internal staff noted opportunities to streamline and better structure By-law provisions to improve consistency and ease of interpretation.
- Confusion about who needs a business licence, when it applies, and what it covers was one of the most frequently cited issues. This was raised by Prosper NWT, the Territorial Agrifood Association, the Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce, and in the public survey.
- Specific gaps identified included:
 - i) Uncertainty about when a licence is required, particularly for new entrepreneurs who are not familiar with the regulatory landscape.

- ii) Overlapping jurisdictions: businesses operating in or near Dettah and Ndilo are unclear about whether City of Yellowknife licensing applies, whether additional territorial licensing is required through MACA, and how boundaries are treated in practice.
 - iii) Confusion about requirements for businesses that operate under the same owner at the same location but under different business names. Under the current By-law, each business entity requires a separate licence, which was described as frustrating and difficult to understand (for example, an owner operating both an electrical and a plumbing company at the same address).
 - iv) Uncertainty about requirements for temporary, seasonal, or pop-up businesses. Participants raised specific questions about one-day event licences and whether the By-law adequately accommodates short-term commercial activity.
 - v) Difficulty understanding what the business licence does, with several participants noting it is “hard to see the value” compared to other permits such as health inspections, which are more clearly tied to visible outcomes.
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c) Application Process and Online Access

- The need for a fully online application and renewal process was the single most consistent request across all engagement methods. It was raised by the Chamber of Commerce, Donna Lee (tourism sector), Prosper NWT, and multiple survey respondents.
- Participants noted that requiring in-person visits to City Hall during standard business hours creates a genuine barrier, particularly for people who are actively starting or running a business. The Chamber of Commerce specifically emphasized the importance of digital access so that applicants are not “stuck coming into City Hall for 9 to 5 hours.”
- Additional application process improvements identified included:
 - i. A step-by-step guide or checklist that clearly outlines what is needed before and during the application.
 - ii. A “who needs a business licence” pathfinding tool on the City website to help applicants quickly determine whether they need a licence and what type.
 - iii. FAQ resources to address common questions (noted as already a strong resource where available).

- iv. Clear upfront disclosure of all requirements so applicants are not surprised mid-process.
 - v. Consideration of an AI-assisted chatbot to guide users through common questions.
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d) Application Requirements

- Participants noted that application requirements could be more clearly defined and standardized within the By-law framework.
 - Some feedback identified instances where similar or overlapping information is requested at different stages of the process, particularly when applications require review through zoning, development permitting, or inspection processes. For example, applicants may be asked to provide similar business or property information to multiple departments during separate stages of review.
 - Staff identified opportunities to simplify and better define core requirements to support consistency and reduce unnecessary duplication.
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e) Internal Administrative Processes

- Internal staff identified several process-level issues that affect the administration of business licences, regardless of what the By-law itself says. These included:
 - i. Reliance on paper-based systems and manual tracking, which creates inefficiency and limits the City's ability to proactively manage renewals and compliance.
 - ii. Coordination challenges between departments involved in reviewing applications, including Planning and Development, Building Services, and Municipal Enforcement.
 - iii. A lack of standardized internal guidance, leading to inconsistent application of requirements across staff and departments.
 - iv. Limited ability to track application status in a way that is transparent to applicants.
- Staff emphasized that many of the friction points experienced by applicants are rooted in internal process gaps rather than the By-law text itself, and that

improvements to administrative systems would have a significant impact on the applicant experience.

f) Fee Structure

- The current \$200 annual fee was not identified as a significant barrier by most participants. However, questions were raised about whether a flat fee is equitable across different business sizes. The Chamber of Commerce noted that at \$200 the fee “doesn’t really affect many” but suggested other jurisdictions structure fees differently based on business size or revenue.
 - The question of whether a sole proprietor should pay the same amount as a larger corporation was raised as a fairness consideration worth examining in the review.
 - One participant suggested exploring multi-year licence options with a discount incentive, provided this does not affect the City’s overall licence revenue. A suggestion was also made to waive the fee for first-time applicants for up to three years to reduce startup costs and encourage new business formation.
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g) Reconciliation and Indigenous Economic Participation

- The Tłıchq and YKDFN both participated in Phase 1 stakeholder interviews. Their input reinforced the importance of ensuring the By-law is accessible and clearly understood by Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses operating across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Jurisdictional overlap was a particular concern for Indigenous-owned businesses operating in or near Dettah and Ndilo, who face uncertainty about which licensing requirements apply and through which authority.
- Participants emphasized that a modernized By-law should actively support Indigenous economic participation, not create additional barriers. This includes clear guidance on licensing requirements for businesses connected to Indigenous land, governments, or development corporations.
- Broader engagement with Indigenous governments and development corporations on the draft By-law framework is identified as a priority for Phase 2.

6. Survey Results Summary

The following table summarizes the key themes identified through the 26-response public survey. Survey questions covered the application experience, renewal process, fee structure, and suggestions for improvement.

Survey Question / Topic	Key Finding
Most common concern overall	Clarity and simplicity of requirements (raised by majority of respondents).
Application process	Strong preference for fully online applications; paper-based process seen as a barrier.
Renewal experience	Desire for automated email reminders 1-2 months before renewal.
Fee structure	Current \$200 fee viewed as reasonable but questions raised about flat-rate fairness for sole proprietors vs. corporations.
Value of the licence	Many businesses unclear on the purpose or value of holding a business licence.
Multi-business / same owner	Confusion and frustration around requirement for separate licences per business entity at the same location.
Jurisdictional clarity	Significant confusion about licensing requirements across City of Yellowknife, GNWT, Dettah, and Ndilo.

7. Next Steps and Closing

The City is moving forward with the next phase of the Business Licence By-law review, informed by the feedback gathered through engagement activities.

The review will focus on developing a modernized Business Licence By-law framework that is clearer, less restrictive, easier to administer, and better aligned with current business practices and community needs.

Engagement findings also identified opportunities for future improvements to administrative processes, communication tools, digital services, and interdepartmental workflows that support the delivery of business licensing services.

Updates will continue to be shared on the City's website, with ongoing opportunities for stakeholders to provide input as draft changes are developed. The process will follow a phased timeline to support transparency and continued engagement:

- **Phase 1: Public Engagement (Jan – Apr 2026)** – Gather initial input from businesses, stakeholders, and staff.
- **Phase 2: Draft, Review and Feedback (May – Jun 2026)** – Develop proposed By-law updates and seek targeted feedback.
- **Phase 3: Presentation (Jul – Aug 2026)** – Share proposed updates with Council and the public, including a summary of engagement findings and how feedback informed the review process.
- **Phase 4: Decision and Approval (Sept 2026)** – Final consideration and adoption of the updated By-law.

The City thanks all participants for their time and input. This engagement process provided valuable insight into both the current Business Licence By-law and the administrative processes that support it. The feedback received will help inform the development of a modernized licensing framework that is practical, clear, flexible, and supportive of a thriving business environment in Yellowknife.