

To:	Warden Matrosovs and Members of the Joint Municipal Services Committee
Committee Date:	April 16, 2026
Subject / Report No:	CAOR-JMS-10-26
Title:	Single Source Purchase of Digital Engagement Platform
Prepared by:	Rob Hatten, Communications Manager
Reviewed by:	Randy Scherzer, CAO
Lower Tier(s) Affected:	

Recommendation

1. **Whereas Grey County and its member municipalities increasingly use a variety of engagement tools to inform service delivery, support decision making and to provide information to their Councils; and,**
2. **Whereas striving to increase equitable access to information and opportunities to influence public services is essential in providing open and transparent governance; and,**
3. **Whereas emerging technology provides innovative means of engaging with residents and communities in enhanced ways that reduce barriers and increase opportunities; and,**
4. **Whereas the Joint Municipal Services Committee has sought to identify opportunities, aligned with the Strategic Plan, Working Better Together, to maximize effective shared use of resources and that Social Point has extended beneficial rates for a potential enterprise engagement solution; it is therefore recommended,**
5. **That report CAOR-JMS-10-26 regarding the single source purchase of the Social Point engagement platform be received; and**
6. **That Grey County move forward with the purchase of the Social Point digital engagement platform in-year in 2026; and**
7. **That the purchase be funded from the one-time general reserve and the annual renewal be included in the 2027 communications operating budget.**

Executive Summary

During the 2026 budget deliberations, Grey County staff recommended the single-source purchase of the Social Pinpoint digital engagement platform (now branded as Social Point) to support the objectives of the Grey County Communications Strategy and strengthen the County's public engagement capacity. At the December 5th Budget meeting, Council deferred a

motion to remove this item from the 2026 Budget to the December 12th Budget meeting pending further information. Given time constraints between the two budget meetings, staff were not able to provide any additional information or to arrange a demonstration of the platform for the December 12th meeting. Therefore, staff recommended that Council proceed with a decision on the deferred motion and that staff would bring forward a staff report with further information in 2026 along with a demo of the platform which Council supported. Given the potential for this platform to be a shared collaborative platform and service with member municipalities, staff are bringing this initial report forward to the Joint Municipal Services Committee, including a platform demonstration.

Public engagement is a core component of effective municipal decision-making, helping ensure decisions reflect community needs, build trust and transparency, and improve outcomes. Digital engagement platforms complement traditional methods by providing accessible, online tools that expand participation, reduce barriers related to time, location, and accessibility, and support greater inclusion—particularly important given Grey County’s large geographic area. These platforms also improve transparency by making it easier to share engagement results and demonstrate how public input informed decisions.

In discussions with a number of vendors in undertaking research and background into engagement platforms, Social Point has provided opportunities to explore potential enterprise agreements that could support County-wide roll out of a single system that could be deployed at both the county and member municipal level. This would have distinct advantages in reducing barriers between tiers of government and would come with reduced costs. While Social Point offers an enterprise solution for Grey and its member municipalities, it is also available as a stand-alone Grey County solution.

Staff recommend proceeding with the purchase of Social Point to enhance current engagement practices and lay the groundwork to grow into a regional engagement platform.

Background and Discussion

During the 2026 budget conversations, County staff recommended the single source purchase of the Social Pinpoint digital engagement platform (recently renamed Social Point), in line with the goals of the Grey Count Communications Strategy. This platform would be used to develop an online public engagement website capable of expanding Grey County’s current engagement capabilities by improving the quality, reach, equity, and scope of public engagement abilities. Further, through collaboration with member municipalities, Social Point can build a regional public engagement platform that can make it easier for residents to engage with their local municipality, the County, and neighbouring municipalities, all through one centralized and integrated platform.

During the budget deliberations it was suggested that staff prepare a report to further review the platform and make a recommendation to Council. Further, Council requested a platform demonstration be provided to see first-hand how it works and how it can effectively improve engagement and participation. Given the potential for this platform to be a shared collaborative platform and service with member municipalities, staff are bringing this initial report forward to the Joint Municipal Services Committee.

What is Public Engagement and Why is it Important?

Public engagement and public participation are important parts of effective government and can play a valuable role in decision making at the municipal level. By involving the public in decisions, municipalities can feel more confident that the decisions made reflect the desires of those who are affected by the outcomes. This process not only has the potential to improve outcomes, it helps build trust and understanding of the programs and services delivered at the County level. Other benefits include:

- Identifying local insights and lived experiences.
- Gathering a wide range of options for solving problems and improving service.
- Helping the public to understand decisions, even if they may not agree with them.
- Reducing conflict and making implementation of decisions smoother.
- Opportunities to include underrepresented groups and communities.
- Improving transparency and accountability.

Engagement can take many forms. One widely recognized and endorsed public engagement framework designed by the International Association for Public Participation, better known as IAP2, identifies five levels of engagement:

1. Inform: Providing the public with information. Example, a media release or an advertisement.
2. Consult: Collecting feedback from the public to inform decisions. Example, a public survey or a public meeting.
3. Involve: Have back and forth dialogue on needs and concerns. Example, a follow-up survey, a public workshop or an open house.
4. Collaborate: Involving the public in the decision-making process. Example, an advisory committee to Council.
5. Empower: Giving the public decision-making power. Example, a referendum item on an election ballot.

When engaging the public, it is important to consider what level of engagement is most appropriate for a decision and developing an engagement plan to match. Where public influence is limited in a decision, the “inform” level may be most appropriate. Conversely, if a decision will have a significant cost, a lasting impact, or affect many people, it may warrant an approach to “involve” or collaborate” with the public for some elements of a project.

Public engagement will often take time, and this should be built into each project and engagement plan. The amount of time needed will depend on the resources and tools available to engage.

Digital Engagement Platforms

Digital engagement platforms are a centralized online platform with a suite of tools to help a municipality or other organizations inform, consult, involve and empower residents. Some common tools built into digital engagement platforms are surveys and polls, interactive maps, special project pages, ideation boards, and feedback tools. Digital engagement platforms are widely accessible as they are available to the public 24/7 and allow residents and affected parties to engage at times when it is convenient for them.

For example, it is common for Grey County to host public open houses or public meetings during daytime hours and early evening hours. This timing may work for some, but not families working through the day and caring for children in the evening. This timing is also difficult for many careers involving shiftwork. Public meetings are not equitably accessible to all; they demand access to transportation, rely on comfort with being in public discussions in English and require 'on the spot' reactions and feedback. As a result, feedback received from these settings will be skewed to the needs and opinions of the demographics that attend.

Digital engagement platforms are not meant to replace open houses and public meetings, but rather to complement them. Traditional engagement methods will still play a role and be required by legislation in many situations. However, having digital tools available to support engagement on the topics extends participation beyond those who are available to attend a meeting in person. These digital tools supplement and support in person engagement activities and can help address equity issues. Digital tools can be used during in-person sessions and can extend access to information and engagement to a broader number of residents.

Municipal case studies and testimonials show that digital tools reach larger and more diverse audiences than traditional tactics. Having broader and more representative participation provides better quality insights and data and enables better informed decision making.

There is also strong data showing they improve accessibility and inclusion, as the platforms typically have mobile-friendly access, multi-language support, and meet web accessibility standards (necessary for compliance with legislation in Ontario). Further, Grey County is one of the largest municipalities geographically in Ontario. Expecting residents to travel large distances to engage on topics creates a substantial barrier.

Most digital engagement platforms not only allow organizations to collect data and feedback, but they also allow make it easy to share results and communicate to the community what was heard, and what actions were taken. Most platforms feature detailed reporting features which can help analyze responses and create clear, easy to understand summaries. These summaries can be shared both externally with the community, and internally with decision makers. Externally, this transparency helps build trust and understanding. It also encourages future participation by showing participants that their time and input is valued.

Engagement platforms also provide value for internal operations. These platforms centralize engagement tools into one place which improves workflows and reduces some of the administrative burden of managing multiple fragmented software tools. In Grey County's case, the tools will allow us to do more with the time we are already spending managing engagement on other platforms such as Survey Monkey or Microsoft Forms, or our website.

Why purchase a platform now?

Staff are observing an increasing amount of County projects that would greatly benefit from more robust public engagement. Two recent examples would be the Municipal Road Exchanges and the Regional Transit Study.

The tools on the market continue to evolve, becoming easier to use for both staff and the public. One new feature of particular interest is the potential to build collaborative regional engagement sites in collaboration with local municipalities. This makes it easy for residents from across the county to engage with both levels of municipal government in one central location without

necessarily understanding who is responsible for what specific service when they arrive at the site. Having one central engagement site will also make it easier to promote the platform across the County, reducing the overall marketing needs for participating municipalities. For example, all municipalities could promote ConnectGreyCounty.ca (or similar) to build awareness instead of each municipality and the County competing to promote individual sites.

Why Social Point

Social Point was the first digital engagement platform offering a regional engagement model for municipalities. Grey County was approached by Social Point about the platform and its features in late 2024. Seeing potential alignment with the Grey County Communication Strategy goal of enhancing public engagement, as well as the Corporate Strategic Plan's commitments to collaboration and service delivery, staff began engaging with local municipalities to gauge interest.

In the spring of 2025, an initial conversation was held at a meeting of the local CAOs. During this discussion, the attending CAOs expressed interest in exploring the possibility of a regional platform further. A demonstration was scheduled in the spring with many CAOs in attendance. Following this second discussion, further direction was given to engage with local municipal staff for further thoughts, feedback, and concerns. Meetings were held in the summer with more demonstrations provided early in the fall of 2025.

During this period Grey County also began re-examining other platforms on the market. Through this research staff learned there were many new platforms available with various features, but the bulk of the market share was controlled by a platform known as Granicus, with a growing number of municipalities launching Social Point or migrating to it from another platform. Through this research, staff compared features and had discussions with a number of municipal communications and engagement staff around Ontario to collect feedback on both platforms, including from several current Social Point clients who chose to move off of another platform. These clients reported higher public participation and better tools with the Social Point platform. They also noted a better user experience on both the public facing side, and the staff-managed back end of the tool.

Several of these existing tools are sold on a 'per population' basis, with pricing based on thresholds of populations that municipalities serve. For example, municipalities with populations up to 20,000 may pay one fee, those at 20,000 to 50,000 another and higher costs with more population served. In a tiered system, this results in the upper tier price being based on the county population, with member municipalities priced on their populations. This can lead to the residents paying, through taxes, to access the same tool, twice.

Social Point acknowledges this challenge and, as a result, has offered to negotiate with Grey for an enterprise solution where a single tool could be used by multiple municipalities for a reduced cost. Social Point has indicated that a discounted rate of between 13% - 15% could be extended to participating municipalities within such a group. It should be noted that this discount is estimated at this time and would be subject to a formal quotation process.

Staff requested a proposal from Social Point as part of this report. The proposal for a sole Grey County enterprise license is \$30,000. For successful implementation and ongoing administration, staff also recommend the purchase of additional administrator and general user

licenses at a cost of \$2,000. Additional general licenses may be added later as needed. Staff note that should member municipalities be interested in purchasing services at the same time, this license cost could be reduced.

Additional optional services are also available at further cost. These services include enhanced implementation support with a project practice lead, additional licenses, project engagement and building support, advanced report generation and specialized advanced training.

Standard training is included with purchase. Migration from other engagement platforms is also included at no cost.

Developing a Regional Platform

Building a successful regional platform ideally involves the participation of all nine member municipalities. Currently in Grey County there are three local municipalities using a digital engagement platform. Georgian Bluffs and the City of Owen Sound are clients with Granicus, and Grey Highlands is a client with Social Point.

Staff recognize that it will be challenging to coordinate the financial commitment from all nine municipalities at the same time for seamless implementation. Given this challenge, it would be recommended that Grey County move forward with Social Point initially, with the intention of building towards a regional platform over time as more municipal partners choose to purchase the platform.

Alternatively, Grey County Council may consider the merit of purchasing an enterprise license for the platform on behalf of all nine member municipalities to support a one-time implementation.

Legislated Requirements

None

Legal Considerations

None

Financial and Resource Implications

Staff recommend moving forward with the purchase of Social Point in-year through a transfer from the one-time general reserve at a budget of \$36,500.

The annual renewal item would be added into the Communications Operating budget beginning in 2027 should Council support proceeding with the purchase of Social Point.

Relevant Consultation

- Internal: Senior Management Team, key internal staff, IT staff
- AODA Compliance

- Contribution to Climate Change Action Plan Targets (describe)
- External: Grey County CAOs, key municipal staff

Appendices and Attachments

None