

Reimagining Public Participation in the City of Hamilton

“Are they really listening?”



Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Hamilton engaged the Social Planning and Research Council to assist its **Public Engagement Policy and Administrative Framework Project** by working on the **Targeted Public Engagement Initiative**. The goal of this component was to focus on conducting targeted engagement efforts with equity-seeking and traditionally underrepresented community groups to better understand current perceptions, experiences, issues, and barriers regarding City-led public participation efforts to inform City decision-making processes and to identify recommendations for improvements.

Outreach included email and phone call invitations to the Immigrant and Refugee Advisory Committee, Age-Friendly Hamilton, Hamilton’s Advisory Committee on Seniors, HamOntYouth Table, Coalition of Hamilton Indigenous Leaders, Indigenous Community Advisory Board, Hamilton Mental Health Outreach, Hispanic Association of Hamilton, Compass Community Health Centre, Immigrant Workers’ Centre, Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination, Pride Hamilton, Empowerment Squared, Hamilton’s Advisory Committee on Persons with Disabilities, Disability Justice Network Ontario, and St. Matthew’s House Virtual Seniors.

Invitations were also extended through the SPRC Twitter and Facebook accounts to opportunities for Youth and Senior Focus groups, with specific note to include racialized, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, and others in traditionally marginalized communities.

Qualitative data was collected through a combination of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with people, facilitated by a Senior Social Planner with the SPRC. Five focus groups were conducted with seniors (2), youth, Indigenous people, and an organization serving newcomer youth and families.

Open-ended interviews were focused on collecting data from communities known to face barriers in public engagement processes including Indigenous and racialized people, immigrants and refugees, people with mental health challenges, people with disabilities, youth, and seniors. Many interviewees self-identified with intersecting identities such as being part of the LGBTQ+ community, or seniors who were racialized, or people with disabilities who had mental health diagnoses, for example.

While conversations were intended to collect feedback on diverse experiences with public engagement, the information collected in this project cannot, of course, be seen as representative of all persons within these groups.

Participants were made aware the information they shared would be kept anonymous. They were also informed of a small honourarium in the form of a \$10 gift card from either Tim Horton's or Starbucks. (Options chosen by participants.)

Prior to the beginning of the interview or focus group, participants were provided with a brief review of the City of Hamilton's Public Engagement Charter. Of over 60 participants, only two noted hearing about the charter.

KEY MESSAGES

🔦 **PEOPLE WERE HAPPY TO BE ASKED THEIR OPINIONS**

Although many people said this was their first time being asked for their input by the City of Hamilton, everyone was willing to do so and expressed hope for meaningful engagement.

🔦 **WANT TO OFFER INPUT BUT DON'T SEE OPPORTUNITIES**

While many participants had provided input in some kind of engagement process with the City at least once, almost everyone reported it is difficult to access these opportunities.

🔦 **WEBSITE IS NOT ACCESSIBLE FOR INFORMATION**

People identified the difficulty they have finding information on the City of Hamilton website. Participants who were visually impaired or unsighted noted particular issues of incompatibility with accessible screen reader tools and the City's website, making it impossible to complete surveys or find other important information.

🔦 **PEOPLE FELT HEARD BUT DID NOT FEEL IT MADE A DIFFERENCE**

Aligned with the findings of the City's survey, participants regularly reported sensing they were being listened to, but in the end felt it made no difference to the outcomes or actions they saw afterward.

🔦 **HYBRID ALL THE WAY**

While every group identified the barriers people face in accessing the internet and accompanying tools through poverty, there was a clear call going forward to use both in person meetings, when necessary, while maintaining the possibility of people joining virtually.

🔦 **IN PERSON MEETINGS NEED HOSPITALITY, TRANSPORT, AND CHILD CARE**

The value of in person meetings such as the ability to communicate better by reading body language and energy in the room, was detailed by many participants. Some also noted the importance of sustainability and economics when it comes to meeting and why avoiding travel was important. When necessary for celebrations or townhalls, in person meetings should be staffed with welcoming people, provide transportation for those who need it, and supply beverages and light snacks especially for longer sessions. A lack of child care options was noted as a barrier, particularly for newcomer families.

📌 **BARRIERS CAN BE PHYSICAL AND ATTITUDINAL**

Many participants reported not only physical barriers such as inaccessible spaces for wheelchairs and walkers or limited virtual meetings, but also identified “attitudinal barriers.” These were described as the attitudes witnessed in public meetings by elected officials, as well as those from staff at the City of Hamilton when interviewees had attended a meeting or visited an office.

📌 **INDIGENOUS and RACIALIZED PEOPLE; IMMIGRANTS and REFUGEES**

It was repeated often that councillors and staff at the City of Hamilton needed to know more in order to engage more meaningfully with people who are Indigenous, racialized, immigrants and refugees. The lack of a Territorial and Land Acknowledgement on the homepage of the City’s website was seen as a strong example of this. Translation was cited as necessary to assist some newcomers in their participation. It was also deemed essential by many to educate new residents on how decisions are made and how it is important and safe for people to give their opinions.

📌 **MIX IT UP**

In an ideal world, everyone would have an opportunity to provide input to the City of Hamilton in the way that works for them. This includes one-on-one interviews in person and over the phone, small focus groups, large townhall meetings with transportation, beverages/food, and chances to have all voices heard. When possible, small group meetings should be held in appropriate community spaces. Virtual links to these meetings would be provided and even virtual participants are offered a chance to give feedback and have their presence make a difference.

FORMAT

The following questions were formulated based on the initial findings of the City of Hamilton's survey on Reimagining Public Engagement, made available to residents throughout the month of March. Over 600 people completed the survey.

These questions were asked in both focus groups and individual interviews.

The answers have been collated and assessed for common themes and key findings.

1. a) Have you ever participated in a City-led engagement session in any form?

b) If yes, did you feel your voice was heard?

c) Did it make a difference?

More than three-quarters of participants indicated that they had previously participated in City-led engagements in some form, including: surveys, townhalls, and participatory budgets.

In both individual interviews and focus groups, most participants felt that their voices were not heard and that their input did not have an impact. Some discussed that while there were opportunities to have their voices heard, they questioned whether the City truly listened as their opinions and recommendations did not lead to any noticeable outcomes.

Participants in one focus group spoke of the experiences faced by Indigenous people within the City-led engagement process. Those in attendance noted that although the City provides opportunities for input, they do not feel there is action being taken in response to input and recommendations made through research. Participants stated there is a disconnect and dismissal of values in the relationship and feel that the City "does not seek opinions, but approval for their agenda". Individuals attribute this to tokenism, noting it is a symptom of systemic racism. For example, participants identified concerns over the Sir John A. MacDonald statue were heard by the City, but not listened to.

2. Participants in the City’s recent survey reported a slight preference for virtual meetings over in-person meetings.

How would you like to provide your input or feedback to the City?

Participants identified a number of advantages and disadvantages associated with both virtual and in-person modalities.

Virtual meetings were seen as being more accessible for some as transportation can be unreliable, costly, and time-consuming. Providing a virtual option allows for those with health and mobility barriers to participate in feedback processes and may be viewed as more financially feasible and environmentally sustainable. Simultaneously, virtual meetings can be a barrier for those who may not be able to use these platforms, such as people who are not familiar with technology, people who experience disabilities, or people who do not have access to phones, computers, or the internet.

Participants expressed that in-person meetings tend to be better channels for engagement and group interactions. In-person meetings may allow people to meet, connect, and build on each other’s ideas more naturally than what is possible in virtual meetings. However, others noted that attending meetings at City Hall may be intimidating or inaccessible for some.

It was suggested that providing people with transportation, hosting orientations to City Hall, or holding meetings at accessible locations aside from City Hall could assist in reducing this barrier. One participant pitched the idea of in-person meetings being reserved for celebrations or special experiences where human touch is needed.

Overall, participants would like to see the City move forward with a hybrid model for engagement, offering both virtual and in-person options to provide feedback.

Methods of feedback collection suggested by participants include surveys, interviews, door-to-door engagement, agency outreach, Facebook, webinars, phone calls, and e-mails. To improve accessibility for people with diverse communication needs, participants suggested that the City should invest in expanding accessible formats, such as: translating materials into other languages, voice screen accessibility, braille, and plain language materials. Participants suggested that the City should provide flexible meeting times and small meeting sizes to accommodate the needs of diverse groups and ensure their voices are heard.

3. Participants in the survey noted a variety of barriers that prevented their participation in City engagement opportunities.

a) What would prevent you from sharing feedback with the City?

b) What barriers do you face in providing input or feedback?

Participants identified a number of barriers to providing feedback. While some participants noted they have felt unwelcome at engagement events, the majority said they were unaware of the City requesting their feedback.

It was noted that not all people have access to the internet and others may be unable to meet in-person. Some participants noted City staff running events seem unapproachable and unwelcoming.

Many noted the engagement processes have been too bureaucratic, full of jargon, not accessible in their language, and at times confusing overall. A bias towards engaging with English-speaking individuals was also identified.

The lack of follow-up and reporting back to participants by the City was also noted as a reason why individuals choose not to participate. Participants noted that they felt unvalued, and their contributions were not recognized. They were surprised at the lack of incentives such as transportation costs or simply having coffee and tea available.

Newcomers/refugees: Many noted that people in this community may not be used to going to meetings and would benefit from someone explaining that this is how their voices are heard. There is a fear of power and authority for many newcomers as well as systemic barriers like racism is experienced through derogatory remarks as well as a lack of visible difference in people present at meetings. People do not see themselves represented and feel isolated.

Awareness/Communication: Participants did not know something was out there and expressed the need for the City to “get the word out and make it widely known.”

Some acknowledged an effort with translation, but target communities need to be aware of opportunities to have their voices heard. Some of their suggestions included:

- Better efforts needed to spread awareness: teaming up with agencies to retrieve and provide information.
- Advertisements in different media forms (websites, local paper, radio, library, buses)

Accessibility

Many participants reported a lack of access to computers and internet. “Not everyone has the means to participate online,” was commonly heard. Finding ways to target digital illiteracy by increasing opportunities for skills and training and providing technology to people who cannot afford it, was identified as essential.

Overcoming physical barriers were identified as key to participation because “City housing and meetings are not always handicapped friendly.” This means not just ensuring the location is accessible for people with varying mobility realities, but also recognizing some people have social phobias, making crowds difficult and smaller meetings preferable.

Incentives were articulated as essential for participation for most participants, as financial barriers often mean people do not have money for technology, transportation, food or drink.

Participants from the Indigenous community question the authenticity and intention of engagement opportunities with City, indicating the need for “more than just engagement; we are looking for relationship and connection.” There were questions as to whether the information collected would be used for anything other than the original purpose.

Some of the comments included:

- “Nothing for us without us.”
- “We feel heard but there is no action.”
- “We keep coming but is it really making change? Are they really listening?”
- “This can be discouraging and draining to keep having these sessions without change.”
- “Low hanging fruit of engagement like powwows and they don’t take it.”
- “At times you wonder if it’s worth bothering anymore when you give your heartfelt input and it’s ignored or not taken seriously. You just think ‘what’s the point?’”

Persons with disabilities

Participants reported they were unable to find what they were looking for on the City website with one participant saying, it is “horrendously inaccessible.”

For example, people who are visually impaired have assistive equipment that does not read maps and other complicated aspects of the website. Surveys are not accessible with screen-readers and paper is not helpful unless braille is available. Some specific comments included:

- “We ask for documents in advance but we don’t always get them.”
- “There are not a lot of meetings on the mountain so DARTS adds another 2 hours (to come downtown).”
- “I don’t think people with disabilities are listened to. We don’t think our voices are heard. They think we just complain but we have the right. You don’t make our lives easy.”

Youth: Attitudinal barriers were identified by many participants, particularly youth. People felt like their voices were not welcome. Some even noted from the first point of contact in a City office, they felt unwanted.

Some youth identified racism as a barrier to participation, noting “disparaging remarks,” have been heard before.

“It might make you feel heard if you know that people with similar backgrounds as you were making the decision, for people to feel equal representation.”

4. How would you like the City of Hamilton to let you know what was done with your feedback and how it was used?

Participants expressed wanting to receive results in different formats based on their preferences and abilities. Some suggestions include through the City website, by phone, mail, e-mail, and other accessible formats. Many would be open to attending collective meetings to receive follow-up in a hybrid format. Participants noted that they would appreciate an acknowledgement of their contributions.

“Close the circle with me – take the information, but don’t make that the last we hear of it. We can’t take information and never hear what happened.”

As many participants feel their feedback has not made a difference, they emphasized a desire to see their feedback used in practice. Participants want the City to report on the information that they receive and see movement and change that reflects what they heard.

Participants want to see the data they have contributed to, understand how it will be implemented, have an opportunity to challenge how this information is implemented in an open forum, and receive regular updates as relevant City projects progress. It was noted that this will help people to feel heard and involved in the issues that matter to them. Participants noted that if they can see the benefits of communicating, they will feel encouraged to continue engaging.

5. In an ideal world, how would you like the City of Hamilton to engage with you on issues that matter most to you?

Participants requested townhalls and community forums that are accessible. Connecting with service providers to let them know how their clients can be involved was seen as an important method of contact. This could mean inviting community partners and clients to be present together.

Some comments from specific populations speak to particular needs and direction on engagement

Newcomers/Immigrants

- Pay attention to all cultural groups.
- Reach out to people in multiple formats to get to know their problems
- Put more money into researching pertinent issues

Racialized communities

- We need a diverse range of City employees to engage the diversity of people in our city
- City employees need to begin building more lasting relationships with the community, not only around election time or when something is needed
- Currently, engagement seems to be centered in the downtown area, and not everyone lives downtown

Indigenous/First Nations/Metis

- To build trust you need to honour our treaty agreements
- Include a land acknowledgement or more about Indigenous people on the first page (of the City's website), something that acknowledges our relationship

People with mental health challenges

- Need more regular communication and getting to where the people are
- Celebrating diversity, giving everyone a voice
- Not hiding people who are homeless
- Help people get to know their councillors.

People with disabilities

- Getting feedback from people on issues that matter to the population such as how "talking crosswalks" work. Some didn't know how to use them and have ideas about where they are needed most. "We need one at Hess and York and other priority intersections."
- Provide messages that include key points summarized
- Open mind and true insightful attitude of seeing us as a resource
- Accessible place, smaller groups to engage more, different times of day/year, accessible formats and features

- Give people with lived experience the leadership because they understand the challenges and know them the most. Put people with disabilities in charge of issues that impact them and let them design it.

2SLGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ participants noted the need for sessions to take place in Queer and Trans friendly spaces.

- “It has to go one beyond the advisory committee. It is not welcoming for LGBTQ folk right now in the current environment.”
- The City has to be visible and assertive in outreach because LGBTQ are not always very politically engaged and some are still closeted so we need opportunities for individuals to reach out.”

Seniors

Individuals expressed wanting the City to seek out input from seniors and to have them come to where seniors are and engage with them. “I’d like them to come here to me.” It was often noted that it is unrealistic to expect seniors to check the website for opportunities to engage.

Participants noted wanting to be engaged with directly and have their contributions acknowledged with one participant noting that it can feel insulting when the City offers unrealistic incentives and expects people to be interested in participating. This highlights the time and costs associated with participating in engagement. It was also noted that City staff can be unapproachable creating the perception that they think “they are better than community members” and that conducting more pop-up community events might be a way for this to be mitigated.

Youth: In the ideal world of the youth participants, the consensus was to have the city engage youth with youth. One youth noted that “the city should engage people and other youth through accessible platforms. Not all people have social media like me which is something to take into account.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

◆ EXTEND THE INVITATION EVEN FURTHER

While many participants had provided input in some kind of engagement process with the City at least once, almost everyone reported not knowing where to access these kinds of opportunities.

Use email and phone, City councillor’s newsletters, libraries, social service agencies, faith communities, and a better website overall or a separate website used to inform people about public engagement opportunities.

◆ MAKE WEBSITE CLEARER AND MORE ACCESSIBLE

Without any prompting, people identified the difficulty they have finding information on the City of Hamilton website. Participants who were visually impaired or unsighted noted particular issues of incompatibility with accessible screen reader tools and the City’s website, making it impossible to complete surveys or find other important information.

Upgrade the website to be clearer and easier to use, accessing resident input to be sure it is user-friendly. Make it fully compatible with accessibility tools such as screen readers for people who have vision loss.

◆ TELL PARTICIPANTS HOW YOU USED THEIR FEEDBACK

Aligned with the findings of the City’s survey, participants regularly reported sensing they were being listened to but in the end, it made no difference to the outcomes or actions they saw afterward.

Invite people who participate in surveys, interviews, focus groups, public meetings, and other engagement opportunities, to hear how their feedback was used in City decision making. Hold a public meeting or email people a final report summary so they know what happened with their input.

◆ MAKE YOUR MEETINGS HYBRID ALL THE WAY

While every group identified the barriers people face in accessing the internet and accompanying virtual tools through poverty, there was a clear call going forward to use both in person meetings, when necessary, while maintaining the possibility of people joining virtually.

Always ensure in person meetings have a virtual option. Save in person meetings for important celebrations or townhalls with reports to the community.

◆ **ENSURE IN PERSON MEETINGS HAVE HOSPITALITY AND TRANSPORTATION**
The value of in person meetings such as the ability to communicate better by reading body language and energy in the room, was detailed by many participants.

In person meetings should be staffed with people to welcome and assist people, provide transportation for those who need it, and supply beverages and light snacks especially for longer sessions. Incentives for participation are also important and indicate value for the participants' time and input.

◆ **ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENTS**

Many participants reported not only physical barriers such as inaccessible spaces for wheelchairs and walkers or limited virtual meetings, but also identified “attitudinal barriers.” These were described as the attitudes witnessed in public meetings by elected officials, as well as those from staff at the City of Hamilton when interviewees had attended a meeting or visited an office.

Ensure City councillors and staff understand the importance of treating residents with respect and valuing their attendance at meetings. City councillors should model inclusive and respectful public engagement.

◆ **INDIGENOUS and RACIALIZED PEOPLE; IMMIGRANTS and REFUGEES**

It was repeated often that councillors and staff at the City of Hamilton needed to know more in order to engage more meaningfully with people who are Indigenous, racialized, immigrants and refugees.

Include an Indigenous land and territorial acknowledgement on the first page of the website. Provide Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression (AR/AO) and 2SLGBTQ+ Positive Space training to all City councillors and staff. Provide information sessions for new residents to the City to learn how and why public engagement is important and necessary.

◆ **MIX IT UP**

In an ideal world, everyone would have an opportunity to provide input to the City of Hamilton in the way that works for them.

Opportunities to provide feedback should include one-on-one interviews in person and over the phone, small focus groups, large townhall meetings with transportation, beverages/food, and chances to have all voices heard. Virtual links to these meetings would be provided and even virtual participants are offered a chance to give feedback and have their presence make a difference.

CONCLUSION

It is clear people were enthused to be engaged in this process of providing feedback on the City of Hamilton's, "Reimagining Public Participation". Overall, participants value being asked to give input on decisions being made by City staff and council.

However, while they appreciated being asked their opinions, there were many barriers to participation, both physical and attitudinal. They also noted there was no evidence to know if their participation made a difference. Alerting residents of the opportunities through better channels of communication and ensuring they know how their participation was used to in decision-making, will ensure more robust engagement in the future.