

2020 Transition Report

Engage Hamilton | CityLAB SIR



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Completed December 9 2020

Introduction/Context

Engage Hamilton is an online platform that was launched in June of 2020 and was meant to compliment the different engagement tools and strategies the City of Hamilton uses to promote greater public engagement and make it easier for residents to participate in civic activities. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform has become the main source of public engagement, instead of a complementary tool. This is due to the COVID-19 restrictions that were imposed by various levels of government which led to the cancellation of all in-person public engagement efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. This has prompted the city to host all public engagement activities online instead.

Currently, the Engage Hamilton platform is hosting many decision-making projects. Such projects require that residents provide feedback on select city projects, policies, and initiatives. Resident input is then gathered and passed onto city council and is utilized to inform decisions regarding policy implementation. For the project, CityLAB students were tasked with creating interactive and creative community-building projects to help build the online community on the Engage Hamilton platform as well as increase the platform's database. To elaborate, community building projects are simple and fun projects that aim to facilitate a positive online space where residents can interact with one another by sharing their favourite food, place, or activity. Furthermore, the secondary objective of the project was to determine marketing strategies that could be implemented to promote the platform and prompt residents to engage with future public engagement projects.

Process

The first step of the project was researching other municipalities within Canada. This research was beneficial in terms of understanding the various tools used such as places, polls, and picture uploads. All municipalities researched featured most to all the tools listed in order to increase the number of individuals who engage on their websites. A pre-existing community building project example that particularly inspired the creation of the group's project ideas was the Photo Challenge initiative led by the Region of Durham. This project allowed residents the option to provide their opinions on their favourite places to eat, visit and explore.

During the research stage, the group also determined that the ideas for community-building projects should be developed on a seasonal basis in order to allow the projects to be maintained on the platform in the long-term. The group then created a timeline for when the projects needed to be released on the Engage Hamilton platform, as well as the timelines for the planning stage.

Once the seasonal ideas were solidified, the group then thought of ideas that would engage the most people. The main ideas included seasonal activities such as tobogganing, gardening, biking, or hiking, as well as favourite food places which included local cafes to grab a hot drink. After finalizing these ideas, the group designed the title, prompt, images, and tools that would accompany the projects on the platform.

To gauge feedback regarding public engagement in Hamilton, the group released an online survey to stakeholders. This survey asked questions regarding public participation such as what motivates residents to participate in public engagement, whether residents have engaged in public engagement in the past, as well as what are residents' favourite activities to partake in within Hamilton during the various seasons. The survey received feedback from 39 people and was utilized to help shape the project.

Lastly, there was a community dialogue that provided an opportunity for the group to verbalize potential ideas that the group developed on a seasonal basis. The questions posed to stakeholders during this session regarding feedback on the seasonal ideas included what went well, what did not go well and action items.

The action items served as suggestions for improving project ideas and ways to allow greater accessibility on the platform. Other feedback received was on civic engagement and marketing strategies as these will determine the outcome of the amount of people that will be participating on the website.

Background Research

What went well:

During the initial stages of when the project was assigned to the group, there was a certain level of ambiguity around the notion of community-building projects. The background research stage was beneficial as it allowed the group to comprehend the scope of what community-building projects entailed through the research of projects that had been launched by other municipalities across Canada. Moreover, the research of such municipalities allowed the team to narrow down the tools various platforms were using as a means of engagement. Specifically, valuable data regarding tools that garnered the most engagement from residents was collected and used to inform project ideas for the Engage Hamilton platform. Moreover, distributing tasks amongst team members during the research stage was also beneficial as it allowed the team to carry out a thorough analysis on a whole host of municipalities across Canada.

What did not go well:

Throughout the research process, it quickly became apparent that there was limited research available on municipalities hosting community-building projects as not many municipalities have online platforms for engagement, and for those that did, such projects were new initiatives and were still in the initial stages of development. Therefore, with limited examples, the team did not have much information to inspire their project ideas. Furthermore, it would have been useful to contact other municipalities and gain first-hand information on the success of community-building projects to guide decisions, however, this was not an option during the pandemic as most municipal staff across Canada is overworked with implementing measures in response to COVID-19.

Designed Seasonal Ideas

What went well:

Limited knowledge regarding community-building projects provided the team with a certain degree of freedom to exercise their creativity and produce out of the box ideas for community-building projects. In addition, the team was able to research Hamilton and formulate ideas that were distinct to the city and its culture. Furthermore, creating multiple ideas was beneficial as the team had back-ups to their main seasonal ideas, and were able to review all ideas together as a group before presenting them to stakeholders during the community dialogue.

What did not go well:

The ideas had to be based around the current pandemic, and the team had to ensure that the projects could be maintained on the platform in the long-term. This was particularly difficult to navigate around when formulating and planning ideas, especially when considering the ever-changing nature of the pandemic and the unpredictability associated with it.

Online Survey

What went well:

The survey allowed the team to increase the scope of engagement in Hamilton by incorporating voices beyond those that were part of the community dialogue. As a result, there was an increase in the number of responses to the questions that were posed during the dialogue which contributed to a rich collection of data to support the project and final report. Moreover, the survey also led to the creation of a stronger sense of community by prompting various residents to engage with the project.

What did not go well:

Since city staff were overworked due to the pandemic, and could not complete the survey, the survey was implemented to gather feedback from peers and McMaster staff instead. Moreover, it would have been beneficial to share the survey amongst diverse communities and on social platforms other than those affiliated with CityLAB to gauge respondents other than postsecondary students, staff, and individuals who follow CityLAB on social media.

Community Dialogue

What went well:

The dialogue was beneficial as it provided the team the opportunity to receive feedback on their ideas from stakeholders who brought unique perspectives and knowledge to the conversation. Due to this, the team was able to learn more about the city both in a positive and negative manner. Furthermore, most stakeholders were active

participants within the dialogue which made it easy to collect data during the various sessions. Moreover, the dialogue provided a space for facilitators to maintain open communication with stakeholders by informing them that the project was rooted within a greater purpose of incorporating public voices to inform changes in policies within the city.

What did not go well:

There were a few technical glitches with accessing Jam boards for a few stakeholders. This required facilitators to effectively communicate and problem-solve within the moment. Moreover, it would have been better to have hosted a test-run of the dialogue with individuals outside of the group to prepare for some of the technical mishaps that occurred during the community dialogue.

Next Steps

| Season | Phase | Date | Task |
|--------|------------|-------------------|--|
| Winter | Initiation | Dec 9 - Dec 23 | Review project details which include: tools, prompt, title, description and obtain approval by administration |
| | Planning | Dec 23 - Dec 30 | Finalize project details, assemble team and devise timeline to design, construct and launch website for Jan 2021 |
| | Execution | Dec 30 - Jan 13 | Implement project on EH website and launch |
| | Promotion | Jan 14 - Feb 3 | Promote project through social media |
| Spring | Initiation | Mar 8 - Mar 22 | Same tasks as above |
| | Planning | Mar 22 - Mar 29 | |
| | Execution | Mar 29 - April 12 | |
| | Promotion | April 12 - May 10 | |
| Summer | Initiation | Jun 7 - Jun 21 | |
| | Planning | Jun 21 - Jun 28 | |
| | Execution | Jun 28 - Jul 12 | |
| | Promotion | Jul 12 - Aug 4 | |
| Fall | Initiation | Aug 9 - Aug 23 | |
| | Planning | Aug 23 - Aug 30 | |
| | Execution | Aug 30 - Sep 13 | |
| | Promotion | Sep 13 - Oct 4th | |

During the planning stage (December 23- December 30), city staff should be establishing accounts on various social media platforms in order to establish a prominent social media presence prior to publishing the projects on the platform.