

# **Reconnecting Neighbourhoods Amidst COVID-19**

## **Transition Report**

CityLAB Student in Residence | Neighbourhoods Project Group

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## **Context:**

The City of Hamilton's Neighbourhood Development Section (NDS) is responsible for supporting resident-led initiatives that contribute to safe and healthy communities. This support assists residents in making positive change and taking leadership roles within their communities. The pandemic presented many challenges for the NDS, including the redeployment of their staff, which affected the NDS's rapport with neighbourhood associations and groups. Rebuilding these relationships and connecting with the residents is crucial to the section's work as the city recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In collaboration with Al Fletcher, Manager of the Neighbourhood Development Section, a group of CityLAB Student in Residence (SIR) students were able to identify some of the unique challenges the pandemic has presented to these groups, and develop strategies to help neighbourhood and community organizations reconnect with residents amidst the pandemic.

## **Project Goals:**

**Engage** community partners and city staff to identify the needs and priorities that can guide Hamilton's community engagement efforts in the current pandemic setting.

**Identify best practices** by studying how other municipalities have adapted their policies, priorities, and engagement initiatives since the start of the pandemic

**Provide recommendations** for adapting the NDS' community engagement strategies to meet the needs of residents and neighbourhood groups during the pandemic.

## **Project Scope:**

### **In-Scope:**

- Establishing contact with neighbourhood associations to gather community input.
- Generating multiple ways of engaging with Hamiltonians during a pandemic.
- Creating a report of recommendations and presenting an action plan to City Staff.

### **Out of Scope:**

- Leveraging expertise from City Staff to obtain feedback on proposed methods.
- Testing and implementing recommendations within neighbourhoods to evaluate the performance.
- Targeting engagement efforts beyond neighbourhood groups (via efforts such as mail-out letters) to gather input.

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## **Outputs and Outcomes**

### **Outputs:**

Digital Engagement: *Methods used to engage with community partners by collecting their direct input and feedback.*

- (1) **Preliminary Survey:** Feedback from this survey gave us a sense of how well different neighbourhood groups were able to adapt to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic as well as their levels and methods of community engagement. It also served as a way to introduce these groups to the CityLAB project and team, as well as re-establish contact with the NDS (since some groups had not been in contact since the start of the pandemic).
- (2) **Virtual Community Roundtable:** Allowed for an understanding of the nuances associated with the challenges, successes and priorities the pandemic presented to residents and neighbourhood groups. This was also an opportunity for residents to connect with one another, the NDS staff, and directly inform our final recommendations by proposing solutions and providing feedback on identified best practices.
- (3) **Exit Survey:** Closely aligned with the content of the dialogue, providing participants the opportunity to provide additional feedback and share any concerns.

Digital Outreach: *Methods used to establish and maintain communication with community partners.*

- (1) **Emails:** Sent to the NDS's directory of neighbourhood association contacts throughout the project. It was the primary method used to share project updates, survey links and invitations. Contact information for some groups were also updated.
- (2) **Facebook:** The results of the preliminary survey showed that Facebook was a popular method of communication among the neighbourhood groups. A list of Facebook pages for the neighbourhood groups was created, the administrators were contacted with the request to share details on the project in the group. This turned out to be a successful way of maximizing outreach for the community dialogue

Deliverables:

- (1) **Recommendations:** A final report, summarizing the project and outlining an action plan for the proposed primary, secondary and out of scope recommendations.
- (2) **Video/Infographic:** A way of presenting the content covered in the final city report concisely and can be easily shared across platforms. A video presentation briefly summarized the project and outlined the final recommendations. An infographic was created to accompany the video, providing an alternate visual summary of the project and recommendations.

**Outcomes:**

- **Re-establishing relationships and building new ones:** The redeployment of the NDS staff has meant that the section has been largely inactive since the beginning of the pandemic. This work provided a means for re-establishing relationships between the NDS and neighbourhood groups. Additionally, this work further strengthened the relationship between McMaster, the city and residents. It was also observed that residents wished to connect with students and utilize their talents and energy. Potential student engagement opportunities within the City and neighbourhood groups were identified.
- **Identified ways of maximizing engagement/outreach:** This project heavily relied on the ability to reach and engage with stakeholders digitally. The restrictions of the pandemic have forced us to be resourceful and adapt processes normally (and more ideally) carried out in-person to a virtual space. This has resulted in us identifying ways to optimize the use of these platforms to better serve our needs.

## Lessons Learned

### Learning Objectives:

- Identify community needs, priorities, and challenges through stakeholder dialogue
- Translate community dialogue into meaningful, tangible change
- Perform effective and timely follow-up with stakeholders
- Alter and adapt existing, successful models from comparator cities to fit local considerations and constraints
- Apply skills and techniques learned in Design, Dialogue, and Project Management classes
- Create professional documents and media for use in the City's policy development
- Develop meaningful and sustainable relationships with city staff and residents

### Lessons:

#### → Communication

- ◆ Since our city partner, Al Fletcher, was redeployed during the project, it was important we were fully prepared for each meeting so as not to waste his time. Things like writing an agenda, making one-pagers for review, were very important to maintaining *effective communication* through the project.
- ◆ When it came to *emailing* stakeholders we found that strategically titling emails will increase the likelihood that recipients will open them and engage with the content.
- ◆ Based on our preliminary surveys results, we determined that Facebook was an effective tool for maximizing our reach for the community dialogue.

#### → Leveraging Stakeholders insight:

- ◆ We learned the value of consulting key leaders or experienced community members. We discussed our dialogue plan with them and gained extremely useful insights such as the event schedule, the time of the session, and ensuring that people have space to talk about how they themselves are doing

## Next Steps

*This is a recommended timeline for carrying out the proposed engagement strategies. They have been ordered based on the amount of resources required to initiate them. Should this work be continued by a future SIR team this is where we recommend them starting.*

### Short-Term (January-March)

**1. Resources for Online Facilitation:** *Once developed these resources should be uploaded to the NDS page on the City of Hamilton website*

1. Comprehensive technical **toolkit**
  - a. **Option 1:** continue collaboration with CityLAB Hamilton, create these resources as a Winter 2021 project
  - b. **Option 2:** in collaboration with McMaster University Office of community engagement, recruit McMaster student to volunteer
  - c. **Option 3:** recruit residents who are proficient in technology to build resources
2. Virtual **workshops** for leaders
  - a. Collaborate with the Hamilton Community foundation to offer the [Neighbourhood Leadership Institute](#) for leaders of the neighbourhood groups

3. **Access** to online engagement platforms
  - a. Survey residents to determine which platforms are most needed (e.g. zoom)
  - b. Purchase a business account through NDS that neighbourhood groups will have independent access to
  - c. **Alternatively:** provide reimbursements for groups that purchase premium subscriptions

**2. Equitable Resources (Non-digital engagement):** *Resources for engaging individuals who have limited access to technology during the pandemic.*

1. Develop Resources
  - a. **Option 1:** continue collaboration with CityLAB Hamilton, create these resources as a Winter 2021 project
  - b. **Option 2:** in collaboration with McMaster University Office of community engagement, recruit McMaster students to volunteer
  - c. **Option 3:** recruit residents who are proficient in technology to build resources
2. Designate a Liaison
  - a. Assign residents, who well connected in the communities, to check in on these residents periodically
  - b. Once NDS staff become available

**3. Virtual Community Development Hub:** *a digital space where residents can connect with one another and with the NDS*

1. Create a NDS **Facebook Page**
  - a. Use it to share updates and resources from the NDS
  - b. Allow neighbourhood groups to promote on this page

**Mid-Term (April-Fall)**

**1. Resources for Starting a Community Organization:** *Official documents and resources for general Neighbourhood group operations. These resources should be regularly updated refined*

1. Neighbourhood group **operating guidelines and policies**
  - a. Create these documents in collaboration with residents and current groups and associations
2. Neighbourhood **Contact Directory:** *a directory of contacts for all neighbourhood groups and helpful city services and organizations*
  - a. Build on and update contacts in the Hamilton Public Library's Redbook
  - b. Survey residents to determine which contacts would be helpful for them (e.g. for translation services, gardening tools) and include it as well

**2. NDS Newsletter:** *Periodic Newsletter released by the NDS*

1. Determine a realistic release schedule and work out logistics
  - a. Assign an NDS staff that will lead this work
  - b. Figure out release platform

- c. Create a system for how Neighbourhood groups can contribute.

#### **Long-Term (Post-Pandemic)**

- *Once resources become available the following recommendations can be rolled out:*
  - Grant Programs
  - Block connectors program
  - Neighborhood development liaison
  - Resources for carrying out in-person activities
  - Discussion with NDS