Hamilton Youth Town Hall

Final Report: Event & Discussion Summary

April 13th, 2024 - 1 PM - 4 PM

Hamilton City Hall

Special Thanks & Acknowledgements

Model City Hall is grateful to have been involved in the organization of the first Hamilton Youth Town Hall. The following was co-authored by Model City Hall's Directors of Operations: Lillian Guy and Tina Liu, with assistance from Program Coordinators: Gladys Kozyra and Len Lu.

This event would not have been possible without the support of leaders across the community. For their support of this inaugural event, Model City Hall would like to extend gratitude to:

- Mayor Andrea Horwath
- Ward 1 Councillor Maureen Wilson
- Ward 2 Councillor Cameron Kroetsch
- Ward 3 Councillor Nrinder Nann
- Ward 4 Councillor Tammy Hwang
- Ward 11 Councillor Mark Tadeson
- Ward 13 Councillor Alex Wilson
- Ward 14 Councillor Craig Cassar
- Ward 15 Councillor Ted McMeekin
- Member of Parliament for Hamilton Centre Matthew Green
- Member of Provincial Parliament for Hamilton Centre Sarah Jama
- HWDSB Ward 2 Trustee Sabreina Dahab
- HWDSB Student Trustee Harry Wang
- HWDSB Student Trustee Thomas Lin
- McMaster Students Union Vice-President (Education) Abigail Samuels
- Angela Burden - General Manager, Community Services
- Rachelle Ihekwoaba - Manager, Community Strategies
- Daniel Ridsdale - Senior Project Manager, Community Strategies
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- Uzma Qureshi - Office of the Mayor, Deputy Chief of Staff and Community Engagement Advisor
- Hasnain Khan - Ward 2 Constituency Coordinator

Youth Strategy

The City of Hamilton's [2022 - 2027 Youth Strategy Report](#) mapped out a five-year plan for how the City will engage youth aged 14-29 and address issues facing youth in Hamilton. Resulting from engagement and collaboration with youth, City staff, parents and agency partners, five themes were identified as areas to ensure youth voice integration in city building. Implementation of the Strategy depends on collective ownership and collaboration across the community.

Of the five priority themes identified through the City's [2021 Youth Re-Engagement Survey](#), some had been previously identified as priorities in 2018, and some were newly identified in 2021. At both the 2023 HamOntYouth Summit and 2024 Hamilton Youth Town Hall, all were considered through youth-led consultations led by Model City Hall. These issues include:

1. Access to Mental Health and Addictions Supports
2. Access to Employment and Training Opportunities
3. Access to Safe and Affordable Housing
4. Enhancing Safety and Sense of Inclusion
5. Enhancing Youth Engagement and Leadership Opportunities

At the 2023 HamOntYouth Summit, the issues of "Addressing Climate Change and Its Impacts" and "Access to Affordable and Accessible Transit" were identified as additional priorities given their effect on the five themes.

Attendance

This event was promoted by Model City Hall, HamOntYouth and the Youth Engagers, as well as the Ward 1, 2, 3, 4, 13 and 14 City Councillors on their respective social media pages. Attendance at the event was not limited to youth from these Wards, though compiled through a collection of postal codes by those at the event, a geographic sampling of attendees was assembled and can be viewed at [this link](#).

Event Format

The Youth Town Hall began with a Councillors Panel where Councillors from Wards 1, 2, 3, 4, 13 and 14 shared what the City is doing on each of the identified priority themes. Following this, youth were split up into three rooms of 20 - 25 individuals, each focused on two out of the 6 priority themes for a 45-minute youth-led discussion. These discussions were guided by questions Councillors posed during their introductory remarks and throughout the discussion sessions, as well as prompts developed by Model City Hall's team.

Each room had 2 - 3 Councillors observing the discussions and available to provide specific insights in response to inquiries raised by youth. Other community leaders available to provide unique insight and perspective regarding existing or planned programs and initiatives included

MPP Jama, MP Green, HWDSB Trustees and staff, as well as staff representatives from various City departments.

Following these 45-minute discussions (and a break for lunch & networking), all attendees gathered again in Council Chambers where representatives from each room shared about the key issues and proposed solutions derived from these discussions. After these representatives shared on the group's behalf, the floor was open to other youth attendees for input and additional comment before Councillors and elected officials were invited to respond.

Event Limitations
The contents of this report - including the background, discussion summaries, and recommendations - reflect the conversations had on April 13, 2024. These conversations are brief forays into the experience(s) of a select group of youth in Hamilton, Ontario and do not reflect the complex, lived experiences of all youth across the City.

SUMMARY: Access to Mental Health and Addictions Supports & Enhancing Safety and a Sense of Inclusion

Background
While programs and support exist to help youth affected by mental health or addiction, service offerings may be limited based on the age of youth they serve, the funding they receive from various levels of government, their physical location (specifically, proximity to transit), and personnel or resource availability. It is necessary to consider youth perspectives on these existing programs, as well as youth sentiment regarding how to improve and expand availability and accessibility of these services. Ensuring all community services, including and especially those for individuals affected by mental health or addiction, are accessible must receive special consideration.

This conversation focused on what youth know about existing resources, programs and services available to youth affected by mental health and addictions. It sought to identify key barriers and challenges preventing youth from accessing existing supports, and placed a focus on ways to ensure the decrease of barriers and increase in inclusivity, accessibility, and safety. It asked attendees to consider what programs and services exist in their City, schools, and community spaces as well as the extent to which stigma affects the likelihood that these resources are used to their fullest potential.

Discussion Summary
To sum these discussions up, one word can be used: disconnect. Youth recognize that programs and services exist, however barriers - either perceived or real - prevent youth from recognizing these programs' and services' potential and value.

In a compelling example shared, one youth commented that a social worker is available to meet with students individually, however booking an appointment must occur up to three weeks prior. Though the resource exists, having one professional available to a community of 110 youth places immense barriers on the effect of their services, both for the community and individual. In a hypothetical, the youth asked "Who can predict they are going to experience a mental health crisis three weeks in advance?"

Youth also shared the effect that stigmatization of mental health issues has on their willingness and ability to seek support. Comments about whether what they share with mental health professionals will remain in confidence or be shared with their parents as well as resistance to accepting diagnoses underline a lack of understanding both as to how these resources function and how these issues (and their solutions) manifest.

Finally, accessibility concerns underlying these barriers to accessing services, spaces, and programs were highlighted. Access to green space in Hamilton was a prevalent topic, with many youths resonating with the statement "just because you live close to a green space does not mean that you are entitled to greater access". Youth shared that they felt that their view of

Hamilton was closed off based on limited HSR routes, and expressed frustration with the accuracy of bus arrival times for the routes they can access.

Recommendations
1. Enhance existing resources in addition to new supports through ensuring cultural sensitivity and making supports more accessible.
    a. Emphasis on cultural sensitivity and how to navigate differences and reducing barriers to accessing mental health support training and certification programs were among some suggestions.
2. Prioritize a holistic approach to mental health programs and services, with a focus on elements such as green spaces and other outdoor activities.
    a. Ensure that barriers to accessing these spaces such as public transportation routes are reduced.
3. Introduce more mental health services provided through culturally component youth-hubs prioritizing peer-led programs.
    a. Youth highlighted the appeal of accessing resources through existing community hubs like libraries or youth centres.
4. Efforts to resolve the disconnect youth report in accessing programs and services must be constructed with youth voice in mind, and through continuous collaboration with all, and most importantly, youth stakeholders.

SUMMARY: Access to Safe and Affordable Housing & Access to Employment and Training

Background
Access to safe and affordable housing as well as employment and training supports are undoubtedly fundamental to young people. However, youth feel increasingly burdened by the employment and housing crisis. While the housing and employment crisis are complex, it is necessary to involve young people in these discussions and create solutions that include youth perspectives.

This conversation focused on how youth see living and working in Hamilton. The discussion sought to identify what resources and supports surrounding employment, affordability, and housing that youth are aware of. It asked attendees about their experience with job readiness, searching for employment, and housing, with a focus placed on how the City can better support them as well as what youth know about existing resources and services.

Discussion Summary
One key issue identified was the lack of regulation of the housing system and a lack of accountability from landlords. In a shocking, but unfortunately common, example shared, one youth mentioned their landlord ignoring bedbugs. This young person faced barriers to finding a new unit, and was stuck in this situation. A related issue identified was the lack of tenant rights awareness and, especially for students, finding information was said to be difficult.

Youth also shared how overwhelmed they felt with the rise in the cost of living and the intense demand for employment resources which are not being met. Barriers to employment such as considerable requirements for entry level jobs, such as the requirement of a vehicle, were identified as significant. Youth expressed that newcomers encounter many more barriers to employment. Youth feel demotivated by the current job crisis.

Another key topic discussed was the lack of protection for the most vulnerable, such as homeless individuals. Youth firstly expressed frustration regarding the lack of respect for unhoused individuals in settings such as hospitals. Barriers to accessing safe and affordable housing for those who are unhoused was also emphasized; one young person shared the story of a formerly unhoused individual who could not get approved to rent a unit due to their history of homelessness. Youth also expressed how they felt that barriers in homeless shelters pushed people to live in encampments.

Recommendations
1. Reduce barriers to accessibility.
   a. Youth commented how employers should reorganize their transportation requirements to include public transport, and not just personal vehicles.
2. Remove restrictive barriers to housing.

a. Youth suggested increased efforts be taken to remove barriers such as restrictive documentation requirements for individuals seeking housing.
3. Enhance by-law creation and enforcement to ensure safe landlord-tenant relations, focusing specifically on equity.
4. Integrate inclusionary zoning and measures such as the Vacant Unit Tax.
    a. Youth shared their support for combining inclusionary zoning, which mandates that developers include a certain percentage of affordable units within their market-rate projects, with measures like the Vacant Unit Tax, which discourages property owners from leaving units empty by imposing a tax on vacant residential properties.
    b. Youth also expressed the need to reduce private condo development or enforce the inclusion of affordable housing within such developments.

SUMMARY: Enhancing Youth Engagement and Leadership Opportunities & Combating Climate Change and its Impacts

Background
In order for the City of Hamilton to become the best place to raise a child and age successfully, there must be spaces for these children to grow and develop into civically-minded citizens, allowing for Hamilton's continued flourishing. Increasing opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills and civic knowledge, as well as ensuring there is opportunity for youth to participate in decision making and voice their opinions is critical and takes collaboration between the City and school boards, as well as youth and agency partners.

Young people in Hamilton and around the world are increasingly aware of the power they possess to hold decision-makers accountable. This is demonstrated starkly by youth mobilization around climate change and participation in climate action campaigns. Issues of climate justice serve as an entry point for many youth into the civic landscape and political domain, and their participation in activism efforts aid in the development of their personal knowledge and tangible skill set, transferable to many domains.

This conversation focused on what youth know about existing programs and opportunities seeking to engage them and aid in the development of their leadership potential. The discussion also sought to identify ways youth feel they are currently being engaged in their communities (schools, arts-based or athletic-based communities, faith-based communities, workplaces and other social organizations) around the critical issue of climate change, and in general how youth feel they are, if at all, being encouraged to integrate sustainable practices into their routines. Linking closely to the climate change topic, the exploration of existing and desired opportunities for youth engagement and leadership development highlighted, as anticipated, that youth-led climate initiatives were a tangible example many youth felt as having contributed positively to their development.

Discussion Summary
Throughout this discussion, youth shared that they believed their schools (through eco teams and eco clubs) promoted the use of public transit and other sustainable living practices (i.e. the three Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle). Youth shared reservations about the efficacy of these efforts however, noting such efforts tend to be mobilized around or focused on select issues. They noted appreciation for when efforts were more strategic in their organization and aim, for example initiatives endorsed, if not by the school, then by the board, for which there was an identifiable outcome were more likely to be successful in mobilizing youth. Insofar as initiatives were not school/board-endorsed, having an identifiable outcome or stated aim to serve as a goal demonstrates that in order for conditions of youth engagement and participation to flourish, leadership, preferably youth must already exist.

Youth identified lack of coordination around and promotion of opportunities to get involved leads to them finding out too late or lacking adequate information to inform their decision to

participate. They shared that balancing numerous priorities, activities and initiatives becomes difficult and they tend to selectively engage in activities for which their participation is incentivized or rewarded.

Recommendations
1. Ensure youth have opportunities to get involved and to lead.
    a. This will have a positive impact on youth participation more broadly.
    b. Youth who lack confidence in their leadership abilities, communication, network or social skills may be hesitant to participate as opportunities to engage appear daunting, or they do not know what to expect.
2. Offer youth substantial information about opportunities to best inform their participation in strengthening their leadership skills.
    a. Youth shared that not knowing what opportunities exist, moreover, what opportunities they are eligible to participate in or benefit from, is often contrasted with having *too much* information and falling victim to information overload - leaving them not knowing where to start.
3. Continue promoting existing leadership and engagement opportunities that allow youth to build personal and professional skills and foster connections.
    a. Youth shared how resources that share a multitude of opportunities from different organizations are appealing to them, as they allow for everyone to find something for them.
4. Integrate youth voice in the continued co-creation of opportunities and skill-based workshops.
5. Develop mentorship programs and career-focused workshops at the secondary school level.
    a. Youth shared their positive views on mentorship programs, speaking to the benefits to their confidence and skills that having a role model or alumni mentor to look up to and work with has on their development.
    b. They shared a belief that mentorship programs and career-focused workshops tend to exist at the post-secondary level, however at the secondary school level and within the community, they lack.
6. Connect secondary school students with professionals and opportunities in their desired fields of work and familiarize them with potential career pathways and resources through initiatives and opportunities led by the City of Hamilton or their schools and school boards.
    a. Youth suggested that the format of these potential opportunities could be similar to a job or university fair.