

The 2023 AMO youth fellows (left to right: Morgan Carl, Catherine Dong, and Jacob Anderson) recently discussed how they view the municipal environment and how local leaders can make municipal politics more relevant to today's young people. *Photo courtesy of Association of Municipalities of Ontario*



# Youth engagement aligning perspectives

by Morgan Carl, Jacob Anderson, and Catherine Dong

If municipal officials really want to engage their local youth in the democratic process, they first need to understand the realities of today's youth.

While many municipal elected officials strive for greater youth engagement, it is not always easy to know how best to get meaningful voices at the table. Since 2018, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) has been promoting the value and importance of municipal governments through its youth engagement strategy and its centrepiece youth fellowship program.

Each year, three young, aspiring leaders are selected as AMO youth fellows. These university or post-grad students

learn about municipal advocacy and leadership as they participate in AMO board and task force meetings, engage on special projects, and partner with a mentor from the board. Participants learn more about municipal government, while the association gains insight into ways to inspire youth to get more involved in local democracy.

The fellowship is just one part of the association's efforts to strengthen municipal governance and democracy. In 2022, the We All Win campaign encouraged diverse participation in the Ontario municipal elections. Building on this, the Healthy Democracy Project was created with a commitment to advancing:

- diversity and equity in leadership and decision making
- civil political discourse
- participation in democracy and local decision making through civic engagement and education

The 2023 youth fellows recently discussed how they view the municipal environment and how local leaders can make municipal politics more relevant to today's young people.

## Youth Engagement Starts with Understanding and Inclusion

Youth need greater awareness of the role of municipal government – particularly as a vehicle for change.

# Municipal World Business Directory



*A trusted online resource for Canadian municipalities to access the specialized products and services they need.*



[municipalworld.com/businesses](https://municipalworld.com/businesses)

Nobody is inspired to run for council because of their trash pickup or because of a Facebook post. People run because they see clear issues in their community they want to fix. Youth engagement starts with giving people a compelling reason to get involved.

Youth need to feel like they are a welcome part of the community. Those who feel like they belong, or feel like they are valued members of the community and have a stake in its future, will simply be more engaged because they are invested.

Elected officials can work with youth to identify and understand their priorities and then take steps that show they care about youth issues.

## Foundations of Youth Engagement

Today's young adults are facing challenges unique to this era. The economy – from home prices to contract work and the gig economy – makes it much harder to develop a sense of security and set down roots in a community. Skyrocketing rents make this prospect even dimmer.

Youth aren't living in the same reality as the generations before them and understanding that is key to understanding why youth are disengaged. Many are disillusioned and overwhelmed, but that should not be confused with apathy.

People in their 20s have seen two global economic crashes, a global pandemic, looming climate change, political polarization, and extremism. They are not naive, and their cynicism has been learned from their experience.

This generation has seen governments fail to make tangible, systemic change for decades, so many do not have faith that elected officials are addressing their priorities. Make no mistake: youth care about the issues and want to fix things – they just need an outlet to start doing that.

## Young Adults Must Establish Independence

At the end of the day, being engaged is an economic privilege and it requires a foundation of stability to build on. If we cannot build a life in our community, then we cannot participate in it fully. If we do not have the means to support ourselves on a day-to-day basis, we are not going to have the time or capacity to participate more broadly.

Elected officials can show support by helping build that foundation – through investment, authentic consultation, and collaboration with young people.

Many young Canadians are disengaged because they simply do not understand the role of municipal government. It is worth noting that many adults also lack this awareness.

Most youth do not know what municipal government does. They do not know how to engage with the system, and they do not know why it is important or worthwhile. This understanding is an essential tool of the engaged citizen.

## Local Councils Can Take Action

Meaningful youth engagement is not found on social media platforms. There are a variety of ways to engage youth:

- **Co-op opportunities/shadowing** – Expose youth to municipal governance, policy, and administration.
- **Policy pitch competitions** – Winning pitch ideas could potentially be funded and trialled by interested municipalities.
- **Civic challenges** – Calls to action that tap into the abilities, insights, and energy of youth to support councillors and their staff on relevant municipal challenges.

Other ideas include Student Vote (hands-on learning to experience the voting process), meet your council days, civics workshops accessible to youth, and youth service ballots.

Engage with youth by going where they gather and providing interesting and actionable information. For example, through social activities and games or permanent signposts along a trail that serve as an educational scavenger hunt or adventure story.

Consider how youth can get experience with decision making, even on a small scale. For example, providing a youth committee with a small budget to run events. Make it clear how somebody can reach out to you, and why they might want to.

## Cultivate Belonging, Trust

Better youth engagement allows us to build stronger communities. As a council, you will need to shift your priorities – to look beyond the concerns you normally hear from people who own cars and property and put the needs of other residents

on equal footing. Youth do not have political capital, so elected officials can offer support by investing in key areas like affordable housing, public transit, and pedestrian infrastructure for those who cannot afford to drive.

Supporting marginalized youth is particularly important. Twenty per cent of Canada's homeless population is aged 13-24, and up to 40 per cent of homeless youth identify as 2SLGBTQIA+. We should fight to ensure diverse voices are included at every level of the policy-making process.

Having a youth committee is great, but consider expanding this out, and putting a youth delegate on each of your advisory and service governance boards. Reaching out to local organizations, particularly those serving marginalized youth, can also help build bridges.

Just like with all public engagement, to build trust, youth expect it to be authentic. That means first explaining how the feedback will be used and then,

afterward, demonstrating how the input shaped the outcome.

When making a decision, elected officials can ask themselves three questions:

- Were youth involved in the development of the policy or the ideas within?
- Will this build youth awareness/knowledge of municipal affairs?
- Will this build a sense of investment or shared ownership for youth?

When youth see themselves as equal stewards, contributors, and co-owners of solutions and municipal spaces – be it a park, a policy, or a pancake breakfast – they will invest their time and effort accordingly. Slowly, we can build a sustainable culture of participation, with youth organically engaging instead of off-loading community responsibilities and roles to elected officials or older adults.

Today's municipal leaders can help ensure this strong foundation for the future by reaching out proactively to local youth. Invite their input on issues that matter to them. Educate them

about how municipal government can be a great way to make positive, lasting change. Inspiring and engaging youth today will help local democracies and communities thrive tomorrow.

*If you'd like to learn more about AMO's youth engagement work or its Healthy Democracy Project, contact Stewart McDonough at [smcdonough@amo.on.ca](mailto:smcdonough@amo.on.ca).*



Morgan Carl ([mcsorganizing@gmail.com](mailto:mcsorganizing@gmail.com)) is a graduate student in public policy and a long-time community organizer.



Jacob Anderson has a BAH from Queen's University, with a major in political studies.



Catherine Dong ([catherinekdong@gmail.com](mailto:catherinekdong@gmail.com)) is an undergraduate student working toward her BMath at the University of Waterloo.

# MUNICIPAL WORLD

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE | WE SHARE YOUR STORIES

MUNICIPALWORLD.COM

as published in **MUNICIPAL WORLD**

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE | WE SHARE YOUR STORIES | MUNICIPALWORLD.COM