



The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) 2022 Youth Fellows presenting their recommendations for youth engagement.

How to better engage with youth in your municipality

Youth engagement in municipal government is low. While youth make up a considerable portion of the population of most municipalities, youth presence at council meetings, consultations, and even voting is unrepresentative of the number of young people who actually live in a given community. Municipalities recognize this as a concern. Councillors and candidates try to engage youth but often report back that doing so is difficult.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) is working on ways to better engage with youth. One way is to bring young people into the municipal sector through its Youth Fellowship Program, part of AMO's broader Youth Engagement Strategy, as well as its We All Win campaign, which promotes increased diversity on municipal councils.

At the 2022 AMO conference in Ottawa held in August, AMO's 2022 Youth Fellows presented their recommendations for how elected officials can improve how they engage with youth in their communities.

Know Your Audience

The benefits of youth engagement in municipal government are well-documented, and there is clear support from

stakeholders to increase it. The question now is how to make it happen. To see why many municipal youth engagement initiatives are not working, it is helpful to look at the assumptions being made about this age demographic. There is often an assumption that youth are a homogenous group who think and act in the same way. This assumption is rarely true and detracts from youth engagement initiatives.

While Millennials and Generation Z do have broadly shared concerns that were not as well-established in previous generations – including climate change, equity issues, and housing – they care about a wide range of issues that vary greatly between age groups, regions, personal preferences, and lived experiences.

For age-based considerations, it is important to remember that the term “youth” is used to describe a broad age range, generally up to 25 or 30 years old. As such, a wide range of consultation strategies is needed to engage a cross-section of age groups.

For school-age kids, this might involve asking them what they would like to see included at a new park or community centre. One municipality recently hosted public meetings about a proposed recreation and community hub. Several families with young children attended,

and the staff leading the meetings prioritized talking to the young people about their vision for the hub. The young people were proud of contributing, and their input will create a better facility for everyone.

For university-aged youth, affordable and attainable housing is much more of a concern. Hosting a consultation on this topic at a university would allow more people to attend and share their perspectives. Many universities have already



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Together, the authors presented their recommendations for engaging youth at the 2022 AMO Conference.



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established student working groups where municipalities can look for advice on issues facing students.

For regional considerations, youth in rural areas will have different priorities than those who live in large cities or in northern Ontario. For example, youth living in Toronto likely have a vested interest in improving and expanding the local transit system. But for a young person growing up and now working in a small town where public transit is limited or non-existent, local road maintenance and access to services will be much more important. In the north, youth are more concerned with economic development, because it may mean the difference between establishing a career in their community or having to move elsewhere.

For this reason, it is important to determine why youth are living in a particular community. Is it the unparalleled opportunities to study and work, as is the case with Toronto? Is it the quiet convenience and character of a smaller city? Or is it the natural heritage of so many rural townships? Determining this will help identify the issues that young people in that community tend to care about, and therefore where to focus in order to increase engagement.

Different issues also matter to youth depending on their interests, jobs, and hobbies. Youth who are involved in farming care about the continued profitability of agricultural operations and want reassurance that they will be able to continue in that industry as a career. Many municipalities in Ontario have a lot to offer in terms of outdoor recreation, so enhancing those facilities is important to the many young people who use them.

In general, it is important for municipalities not to make assumptions when consulting with their youth populations. Instead, they should have genuine consultation with these young people.

If municipalities do homogenize youth, they run the risk of losing out on valuable information. If municipalities commit to addressing the issues that matter to youth and ask for input on how to solve them, engagement will increase for the benefit of everybody.

Address Historic Civic Disempowerment

There is often this assumption that youth are passive on the social issues

around them and suffer from political apathy. Voter turnout has hit record lows, and this is even more pronounced for young people. However, if you take a glance at social media, youth are engaged and vocal about social issues affecting them. From racial justice to climate change, youth are not only aware of social problems, but are also actively mobilizing to address these issues.

The issue lies in connecting this activism and passion for social issues to electoral engagement. This gap in participation is more visible and apparent for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized youth.

Many communities feel disconnected and socially alienated stemming from decades of civic disempowerment. When assessing the participation of Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth in municipalities, it is also important to be aware of the historical context that has produced the current barriers to participation. Many communities have experienced severe injustices throughout history and continue to bear the repercussions.

These experiences serve as the current political impetus that fuels the feelings of abandonment in certain communities. Overwhelming feelings of disempowerment and abandonment fuel the disconnect.

This deficit position is the current circumstance under which communities and their elected representatives are functioning. The importance of improving civic and broader engagement within these communities cannot be understated.

But first, we must be ready and willing to remedy this relationship and foster trust and confidence within these communities. We need to confront systemic racism within our governments and influence cultural shifts to increase the opportunities for youth to participate:

- **Support the unique material needs of these communities** – Empowering youth of colour is intrinsically tied to having basic needs met such as ensuring feelings of safety and belonging.
- **Forge the connection** – Expanding options for youth programming that provide safe spaces for youth to cultivate a passion for municipal governments is crucial in shifting perspectives and addressing feelings of disconnect. Emotional empowerment is closely aligned with civic action.



The Association of Municipalities of Ontario 2022 Youth Fellows, and moderator (now former South Algonquin councillor) Bongo Bongo (left), presenting their recommendations for youth engagement.

- **Effective action requires deliberate intent** – It is important to be meaningful in engaging with youth from marginalized communities. Avoid falling into the pitfall of viewing youth as one homogenous group. Learn and honour the unique history and address their unique circumstances.
- **Localize the passion and meet youth where they are** – Most youth are aware of the issues affecting their communities. The responsibility of a municipality is to localize the global issues youth are grappling with like advancing racial justice, and climate change. Then, provide safe spaces to engage youth to affect change through the existing tools at the municipal level.

Prioritize Civic Education

Increasing and modernizing civic education presents an important solution to the problem of youth engagement. It is a tool that can help build stronger connections between youth and their communities and, more importantly, it can help address the knowledge gap among youth regarding local government.

First and foremost, young people are not being consistently taught about municipal government in schools. High schools, colleges, and universities generally have very limited course offerings when it comes to municipal politics and local issues. As a result, youth are not informed, and they do not appreciate

the important role that local government plays in their day-to-day lives.

The consequences of this systemic failure are evident from council chambers to the ballot box. While youth are politically engaged, particularly in online spaces, their representation on municipal councils and at the ballot box is severely low. Youth are not taught how to exercise political agency/power in their communities, how the system works, or how to advocate for their priorities.

High school and post-secondary years are an impressionable time for young people. This is when many start their first jobs, engage in volunteer work, and begin contemplating their future career ambitions. Frankly, a career in municipal government does not have the same hype or acclaim as, say, a doctor or lawyer. Students also may not even be aware of it as an option. Young people must be provided with opportunities to learn about local government and the rewarding career possibilities as an elected representative or municipal public servant.

Local government knowledge needs to be more accessible in the classroom, and young people need more school-based opportunities like co-op and volunteer work, which support youth inclusion. After all, the best way to reduce youth apathy and ignorance is through knowledge and inclusion.

Councillors, mayors, and municipal staff also have an important role to play in youth engagement and can do better to reach out to young people in youth-friendly spaces. High schools, colleges,

and universities are an obvious, but highly ignored, space for municipal representatives to engage with young voters.

This is strange given that nearly all post-secondary students are already eligible voters and many in high school are soon-to-be or already eligible to vote. This is a valuable opportunity for local representatives to collaborate with schools and educators to help build connections with students face-to-face. This is important as youth have been traditionally ignored by local representatives and effectively shut out from municipal politics.

Youth engagement is about more than just interacting with young people. It is about fostering real and meaningful relationships between youth and local government. To do this, municipal government must provide greater support for youth involvement in local decision making. The first steps to building a more positive and inclusive relationship between youth and local government are:

- engaging young people in their own spaces;
- listening to their ideas and opinions; and
- showing when you act on their feedback.

Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to youth engagement. Depending on size and location of the municipality, staff and elected officials will have to tailor their strategies and tactics.

Be Intentional and Proactive

Engagement with any group works best when it is thoughtful and proactive. Any relationship is better off started proactively rather than in a time of crisis. Think of these three strategies in your community:

- Reach out to the youth in your communities where they are about the issues that matter to them specifically.
- Consider the historic context and lived experiences of the youth in your community, especially youth who are Black, Indigenous, or racialized.
- Help educate young people on how local government works and how their voices can be heard. [MW](#)

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