

Engage Aurora invites residents to weigh in through new platform

If you have ever had a concern about something in Aurora, and have been looking for an avenue to weigh in while also protecting your privacy, the Town has launched a new platform to allow residents to speak out.

Engage Aurora, an online platform launched by the Town last month, has replaced Place Speak, the Town's previous channel for online engagement.

It was launched to address some of the 'limitations' previously identified and provide residents with a streamlined way to engage in the public process.

'There were definitely some limitations to PlaceSpeak in terms of usability, the friendliness of the platform and being able to encourage residents to engage on there,' says Cindy Shaver of the Town of Aurora. 'There was a lot of feedback from the public that it was not a user-friendly template to manoeuvre and intuitively know what to do on the platform.'

One of the largest obstacles of the previous model was the user verification process. It is important to 'verify who your audience is' and gauge who is actually participating in engagement opportunities, but Ms. Shaver says some people were 'turned off' on the amount of information they had to provide to participate in the old platform.

'Now, we're not asking for specific addresses,' she explains. 'The new platform asks you for your first name, last name, email address and postal code and age demographic, and that allows us to better understand who we are speaking with' without having to give specific addresses, and a huge advantage is you can actually have a screen name. You provide information to us in the back end so we can verify you are from Aurora, but residents don't need to feel concerned or that they [are] not able to voice their opinion as they want to for fear of backlash or that maybe someone can identify them.

'You can use a screen name that allows them to keep their anonymity on our platform but allows us on the back end to be able to verify it is actually someone from Aurora when we look at the comments and the feedback provided.'

Engage Aurora runs on the Bang The Table platform and has allowed the Town to tailor the engagement tool for a more local feel.

Four municipally-driven initiatives are currently on Engage Aurora for the public to comment on, including the development of the Town's 2021 Budget and the creation of a Community Energy Action Plan (CEAP).

'The idea is that this is going to grow,' says Ms. Shaver, adding that municipal staff are currently being trained on the ins and outs of the platform in order to engage directly with residents and address their concerns. 'What we envision for this is we will be able to get more of those engagement opportunities online because experts in our organization are actually going to lead the consultations online and be able to participate in this online process.'

'Beyond that, we're also embarking on our Official Plan review, which is being led by our Planning Department. Right now, we're just asking for general comments, but this is about a three-year process for the Official Plan review and we will be going through different phases where we will be soliciting feedback from the community on certain topics. The idea is things are always changing and evolving, so we're looking for residents to register now so they can stay abreast of what is happening and this will be the go-to spot for engagement opportunities.'

Whether you want to provide feedback on any of these initiatives, or a concern that is specific to your own particular neighbourhood, Ms. Shaver encourages residents to 'come in, poke around and take a look' on what Engage Aurora has to offer.

'I definitely think residents need to give this a chance, sign up, and what's really cool is obviously you don't need to get involved in everything, not every consultation is going to be to each individual resident's interest, but what you can do is follow projects that are

of interest, she says. This is a great way to stay abreast of one thing that is of interest and follow a project from beginning to end and engage where able to. It is definitely Council's will to have our engagement opportunities expand. That is definitely the area we're looking at as an area we haven't really tapped with full capabilities. We know our residents are busy, we know that while we're providing lots of opportunities and we're expanding our in-person engagement we're still only hitting a small fraction of the population because people are busy. This platform allows people to engage with us when it is convenient for them.

To become involved or find out more, visit engageaurora.ca.

By Brock Weir