

# Using technology to boost participatory planning

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The use of technology to help with public engagement in the planning process has seen a big boost during the COVID pandemic. While physical distancing requirements have limited traditional models of engagement, such as PICs or open houses, it has also exposed how, in many ways, these methods are no longer the best and only ways to effectively engage residents in shaping the future of their communities.

Effective use of engagement tech is about more than doing the same in a digital space. If the best we can do is hold a video chat in lieu of an in-person meeting or post a PowerPoint presentation on a website, we are not seizing the full potential of technology. At its best, engagement tech can be used to reshape the planning process, not just how we engage. There are examples of how technology can take engagement to another level and, in some cases, flip the script

on the traditional planner-citizen dynamic. Engagement tech is giving citizens a whole host of new ways to not only participate in traditional planning processes, but to help shape and initiate those processes themselves. Here are two examples from our experience.

## PLANLOCAL STREET SPACE

One positive outcome of the pandemic is that people are making better use of public spaces, including streets, trails, or bike paths, than they were before. Even with staged re-openings, a new expectation has emerged around designing more people-friendly streets to anticipate a new normal over the coming months or years.

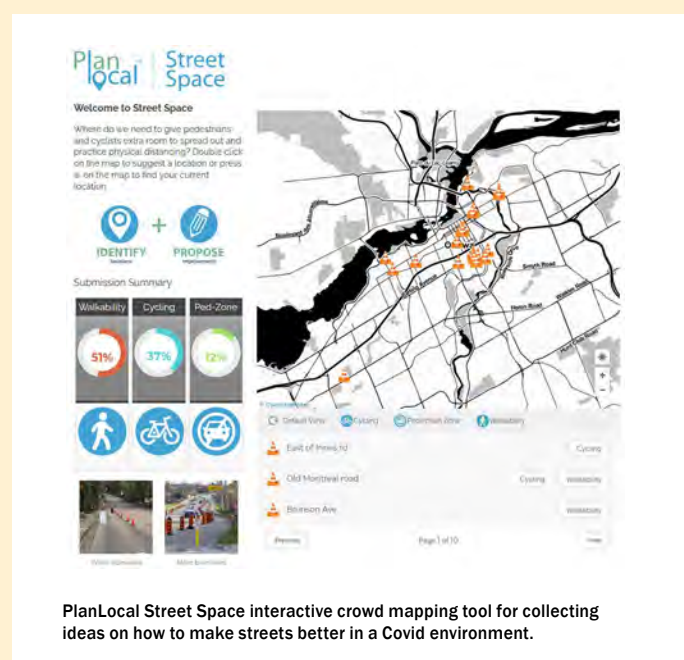
In a departure from the top-down approach to planning, growing grassroots engagement is helping identify the needs for better streets on the ground to help inform decision makers. This bottom-up approach is being made possible by the work of professional planners combined with new digital engagement tools. In our work, we have partnered with a variety of local organizations to help advance this important discussion in several cities across Canada, using a custom online engagement tool to gather spatial information about the locations and types of interventions needed around cities.

The tool was put in the hands of local organizations in a variety of communities including Guelph, Ottawa, Regina, and Saskatoon, which then promoted it through their networks. What results is a live, real-time discussion on a crowd-map of areas of concern. The data is then organized and provided in an open-source format to residents and decision makers for use in future planning, whether next week, next month, or in the years to come.

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## THE DAILY SCHOOL ROUTE

In another context, we are using technology to help increase the walk-to-school rates among elementary-aged children in Hamilton through an initiative called The Daily School Route. Partnering with the local schools themselves, engagement tech is being used to understand existing travel patterns and barriers through mapping,



engagement, and analysis. The outputs are being used to create an alternative transportation system for kids with the data feeding into secondary planning, transportation planning, and neighbourhood smart commute initiatives. Equally as important, the results are made available to parents, kids, and school communities, which provide helpful feedback and tools they can use to plan their walk to school on a day-to-day basis. Technology has made this possible through user-friendly and cost-effective data collection that can be aggregated year over year to track trends.

In the end, engagement tech is effective when it is designed to meet people where they are at. As national statistics suggest, this is more and more online. According to Statistics Canada, 88 per cent of Canadians own a smartphone, while 91 per cent of residents 15 years and older use the internet. Where previously age was believed to be a barrier to access, we have found



that digital engagement now reaches across demographics. National statistics indicate that 71 per cent of seniors in Canada reported internet use in 2018, which marked a 23 per cent increase over a six-year period.

COVID did not initiate these trends, it merely accelerated it. Moving forward, professional planners need to do more than just meet the minimum standard of public engagement. There is a real opportunity now to use engagement tech to bring more people into the process with participatory planning. This means much more than building a static webpage – it means thoughtfully designed digital engagement that provides residents with a meaningful role in shaping their communities. (W)



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