

CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT

Recommendations for the City of Toronto

With support from The Atmospheric Fund in the fall of 2015, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA) began a year-long project to identify and implement strategies to improve engagement on climate action. A major focus of this work was to draw the connections between climate action and other issues such as job creation, poverty reduction, and improving transit access.



As a cumulative effort of this project, TEA hosted a Design Forum on October 4th 2016. This event brought together over 40 diverse community leaders over the span of 3 hours. All of the community leaders work on a range of grassroots issues in the City including housing, settlement services, and poverty reduction. Drawing from the group's expertise on grassroots engagement, we discussed the barriers and opportunities for engaging Torontonians on climate change actions.

This led to the development of a list of recommendations to the City of Toronto's TransformTO initiative that will be incorporated into their long-term engagement plan. The recommendations will also continue to inform TEA's on-going work on climate change.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MESSAGING:

LEAD WITH ISSUES THAT MATTER TO YOUR AUDIENCE, NOT WITH CLIMATE CHANGE. In order for people to feel engaged and motivated to act, we need to speak to their lived realities. We need to make climate change feel relevant to their priorities. For example, lead with talking about expanding or improving transit, creating good green job opportunities, or creating green community spaces such as parks. People can more easily have conversations about climate change if they are talking about it as it relates to issues like poverty reduction, job creation, improving housing, transit, and food security.

AVOID JARGON AND OVERLY-TECHNICAL LANGUAGE. Many people feel alienated by jargon and overly technical and scientific language. We need to talk to people about the issues they care about in accessible terms.

THE MESSAGE WILL RESONATE MORE IF IT IS DELIVERED BY THE RIGHT MESSENGER. Find people who are known and respected by your target community (and are, ideally, from the community). Resist using environmental experts to attract people to engagement activities. Some people are intimidated by experts; others will only go to a consultation if they know the people running it. In order to work with diverse communities, finding facilitators who can speak the same language is an important asset. The messengers need to be able to communicate ideas with a community in a way that people will find easy to understand and relatable.

TARGET YOUR AUDIENCE. Rely more on narrowcasting (messaging that targets specific audiences) and rely less on broadcasting (one message for everyone).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:

ENGAGEMENT SHOULD BE ON-GOING RATHER THAN ONE-OFF. To get people engaged and motivated to act, you have to develop relationships with them. We need to move beyond traditional consultation methods, and look to have more engaging on-going conversations.

FOCUS ON WHERE PEOPLE LIVE AND GO TO WHERE THEY SPEND TIME. Engagement should take place in local spaces where people already gather (eg. schools, workplaces, malls, community centres). Don't expect them to come to you. Utilize more localized engagement tactics such as pop-up engagement activities in a community.

LEVERAGE EXISTING NETWORKS AND ACTIVITIES. Connect climate change work to other strategies and projects that the City is working on (eg. Poverty Reduction Strategy, transit expansions). Rather than developing brand new consultations on climate change, find existing projects where people are mobilized and have conversations about climate change in these circles.

SUPPORT SMALL LOCAL INITIATIVES ON THE GROUND THAT CAN ALSO BECOME A BASE FOR REPLICATING EFFORTS ACROSS THE CITY. Small projects offer the opportunity for innovation while also creating benefits for the community (e.g. community gardens, green community spaces, bike share programs).

MAKE ENGAGEMENT FUN AND INTERACTIVE. Avoid engagement where people are mostly "talked at" or where they passively interact (eg. lots of reading).

FACILITATION IS ABSOLUTELY KEY TO FUN AND EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT. A good facilitator has to understand the target audience and know how to keep people engaged. When possible, it is best to choose a facilitator who is connected with the community on the ground.

MAKE IT CLEAR TO PEOPLE THAT THEIR ENGAGEMENT WILL ACTUALLY HAVE AN IMPACT. It is important to be clear about why these engagement activities are important and what specific programs or actions their feedback will help inform. It's also crucial to keep participants informed of the outcomes following the engagement activities.

DEVELOP ENGAGEMENT METHODS THAT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT PEOPLE HAVE LIMITED TIME AND MONEY. If travel and a time is required, make sure they are compensated for travel and that child care is available. Using a number of different engagement methods will also allow you to engage a greater number of people.

BARRIERS TO CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT

The dominant language used to discuss climate change alienates people.

Most people have little or no awareness of climate change issues.

Climate change isn't seen as relevant to people's daily lives.

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People have very little time available for engagement and must focus on daily survival.

Climate change is seen as a "for activists only" issue championed by privileged people.