

New online survey platform connects people with local issues

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 25, 2012



Survey results will be used by Metro Vancouver planners to help shape the region.

Photograph by: External

Metro Vancouver has always had its issues, but the old methods of getting residents' feedback — public hearings, open houses and surveys at the doorstep — aren't as effective any more in the Internet world.

A new start-up called Place-Speak hopes to bridge that gap with a virtual consultation platform designed to connect people with local issues — such as a massive housing development, dog park or transportation project — online.

The platform, which links a citizen's identity with a residential address, will provide a broad view of how those in a specific geographic location feel about a specific issue. It will also allow potential online dialogue between citizens and local government.

New Westminster, for instance, used PlaceSpeak to consult with residents as part of its master transportation plan, said PlaceSpeak CEO Colleen Hardwick. Residents who registered will be invited to participate in other issues that arise.

"We're breaking new ground," Hardwick said, noting the technology ensures people who participate are linked to a specific location to verify the data, but their privacy is protected. "We've got to reach people online. It's not just about engagement, it's about turning that engagement into evidence to shape our policies."

The PlaceSpeak platform arose out of a bid by Hardwick to Urban Futures Opinion Survey 2012, which would be the third in a series of geographically specific studies in 40 years. While the first two surveys — in 1973 and 1990 — were conducted by the regional district, PlaceSpeak will use similar questions to compare the changing attitudes around economic, social, mobility and lifestyle issues across the Lower Mainland.

Some questions have been dropped, such as one about the Canada Line, because the issues have already been resolved, while new issues have been added.

Hardwick said she expects the survey data, slated to be released next spring, will be used by planners to shape the region, just as previous studies created the livable region plan for the Metro today. Residents can also go back to the site to view the other responses and see what's been done.

"No other region in the world has the same information going back 40 years," she said. "That data will form part of our collective knowledge."

“Since 1990, the region has changed exponentially. It’s going to be interesting.”

More than 1,240 surveys have already been completed, with high numbers from Vancouver, New Westminster, City of North Vancouver and Bowen Island, while Delta, Port Moody and Pitt Meadows are also represented.

The survey, which takes 22 minutes, can be found here: <https://www.placespeak.com/topic/323/urban-futures-survey-2012/>

Ian McKinnon, chair of the National Statistics Council and former head of Decima Research, said the new platform will give residents a chance to express their views in a low-key manner while allowing city planners to pinpoint people in a specific neighbourhood when they’re dealing with a new plan.

By narrowing the responses to a particular area, he added, the city can get a better idea of what’s underpinning residents’ concerns.

“Over time you can get used to consulting in a low-key fashion about your preferences, and not waiting until a multi-million-dollar development [is proposed] and lines are entrenched. It certainly gives people an opportunity to respond more systematically than they can now.

“Once people start hearing from friends and neighbours that the feedback is listened to, it’s likely to snowball.”

Hardwick said the idea, which is a personal homage to her father, the late urban geographer Walter Hardwick, who was involved in the earlier surveys and in regional planning initiatives such as False Creek, was born out of the need to consult people in a changing world.

She noted the old ways, such as telephone surveys and door-to-door interviews done in the 1971 survey, aren’t relative today, mainly because many people don’t have landlines and won’t answer the phone or door to strangers. By linking residents’ identity to their address — while protecting their privacy — she said the data will be verifiable and provide decision makers with “hard data they can point to” when making policy decisions.

ksinoski@vancouver.sun.com

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