



SFU

MORRIS J. WOSK  
CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

# **“WE, AS CITIZENS, DON’T HAVE TO BE SMALL”**

Review of CityHive’s City Shaper Program



This report was compiled by members of the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre For Dialogue Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative team. Special thanks to Nicole Doucette, Fergus Linley-Mota, Jennifer Wolowic, Daniel Savas and Mark Pickup for contributions to the evaluation.

Suggested Citation: Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative (2021). Vancouver, Canada: Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Simon Fraser University.

Funding for the City Shaper program and evaluation provided by the Vancouver Foundation's 2019 System Change Grant.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

City Shapers was a civic education program in Metro Vancouver run by CityHive in partnership with the Simon Fraser University Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Throughout 2019-2020, three cohorts of adults aged 18-30, explored pressing urban issues and local decision-making.

An arms-length evaluation by SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative explored participant opinions on the program's strengths and weaknesses and its impacts on their engagement and opinions of democracy.

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*"I feel like I came out of it with a bit more sense of 'okay, we, as citizens, don't have to be small. We can actually take on some of these issues.'" – Cohort 2.*

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### Key Findings

- **Participants grew their confidence in developing their networks and engaging in change-making.** After the program, 91% of participants surveyed reported City Shapers gave them a more optimistic view of civic engagement. Interviewees also expressed having more confidence to reach out to organizations and speaking with decision-makers. They also mentioned interacting with guest speakers and peers of the program gave them a starting point for future connections.
- **Participants found the guest speakers and working with peers created the strongest impacts.** Guest speakers and group work were consistently rated as the most important parts of the program. In post-surveys, 88% of participants surveyed believed discussing and hearing other participants' views had an impact on their views on civic engagement. Being able to have honest conversations with speakers and each other contributed to increased knowledge and commitment to engagement.
- **Some participants found the program too theoretical or wanted more formal civic education components.** While the emphasis on ideation was helpful for participants, some participants were looking for more hands-on change-making to see the results of their efforts and felt let down that the program stopped after presenting ideas. Participants also left the program with varying levels of step-by-step understanding of how cities and policy change work. Members of each of the three cohorts requested more civic education be integrated into the program.
- **Many participants gained a better understanding of policy processes and strategies for talking to decision-makers.** Leaving the program, participants understood they needed to do their research and understand both the problem they were trying to impact and find others already working on the issues. Some interview subjects were able to express how they would strategically approach decision-makers to create change.
- **Impacts on participant opinions on democracy were mixed and mostly focused on civic engagement.** Participants in the program entered with very high levels of democratic activity and commitment. After the program, participants' noted their increased capacity to participate and their appreciation for diverse perspectives in the program. However, almost no participants volunteered connections to democracy without being directly prompted, and a few resisted connections between the program and their definitions of its meaning. The program results point to a need for overtly connecting values of democracy to the program components.

## BACKGROUND

### About City Shapers

City Shapers was an experiential, cohort-based civic education program for Metro Vancouver young adults. From fall 2019 to summer 2020, three cohorts went through the program. They explored isolation (cohort 1) or resilience (cohort 2 and 3) in an urban context, emphasizing municipal and local decision-making. In total, 97 participants went through the City Shaper program.

- Cohort 1 took place in person from October to November 2019
- Cohort 2 and 3 were online to comply with Covid-19 safety protocols (Cohort 2: May-June 2020 and Cohort 3: June-July 2020)

The program focused on facilitated discussions and group work. Each cohort had several guest speakers that included professionals, elected officials, city staff, and community leaders. They were invited to speak and offer feedback to participants' ideas as a means of exploring traditional (e.g. voting, running for office) and informal (community activism) examples of civic engagement and change-making. Group project work and final presentations focused on developing agency among the participants and a deeper understanding of how government works. Throughout the program, there was an emphasis on helping participants learn how to become more active in their communities and government decision-making.

The project was funded by a grant from Vancouver Foundations System Change Grant. CityHive developed and facilitated the program. SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative provided independent arms-length evaluation.

### About our Organizations

CityHive is a youth-led organization in Vancouver, Canada. The organization leads civic education, innovation labs, consulting and events to transform the way young people shape their cities and the civic processes that engage them." To find out more, visit [www.cityhive.ca](http://www.cityhive.ca)

The Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative explores teaching, learning and community activities related to democracy. We want to understand what can influence people's perspectives, understandings and potential commitment to democracy.

Simon Fraser University Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue works to foster shared understanding and positive action through dialogue and engagement. Since 2000, our staff, fellows, and associates have been leaders in a diversity of fields. These include dialogue, climate solutions, diversity and inclusion, public engagement, deliberative democracy, systems change, decolonization, urban design, sustainable community development and strengthening democracy. To learn more about the Centre's Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative, visit [www.democracydialogue.ca](http://www.democracydialogue.ca).

## EVALUATION METHODS AND CONSIDERATIONS

We conducted an arms-length evaluation of City Shapers to gauge its strengths and weaknesses as well as its impact on participants' connections to democracy.

Our evaluation included four steps for each cohort. Participation in each step was voluntary for participants. Draws for gift cards were used to encourage participation in each step.

- First, we conducted a pre-survey online on the application form for each cohort. The survey asked about participants' level of community engagement, feelings of belonging, self-efficacy and trust in democracy.
- Second, we conducted a post-survey online that asked the same questions as the pre-survey, plus an additional set of questions related to the learning tools and experiences students used and took part in throughout City Shapers.
- Third, we conducted in-depth interviews over Zoom with participants within a month of each cohort's completion. Interviews provided a deeper understanding of participant's experiences in the course and their general opinions.
- Fourth, we conducted a follow-up post-program survey approximately six months after each cohort ended with the same questions as the second survey. The purpose was to measure what concepts and learnings had longevity after the program.

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	6-month Post Survey	Interviews
<b>Cohort 1</b>	35 Participants in October 2019	21 participants in December 2019	8 participants in May 2020	4 in December 2020
<b>Cohort 2</b>	31 participants in April 2020	17 participants in June 2020	11 participants in December 2020	5 in July 2020
<b>Cohort 3</b>	31 participants in April 2020	10 participants in August 2020	10 participants in December 2020	3 in August 2020

All research has limitations, and we must acknowledge the considerations and limitations in this evaluation. For example, there were a lot of variation among the three cohorts. The topic-focused content and guest speakers changed and the discussions between participants were open-ended making the experience in each cohort somewhat unique. This variation may have influenced or muddled the results. We also saw a significant drop off in participation in the six-month post-survey so it is difficult to make any statements about the program's lasting influence. Finally, much of this report is based on those who volunteered for interviews, but those participants may not be a representative sample of the experiences in the program. We were conservative in our analysis to avoid making any unsubstantiated claims.

Please note, this study was exempt from SFU's Office of Research Ethics approval because it fits the scope of a program evaluation according to guidelines of the Tri Council Policy Statement. Although formal approval was not required, research ethics' best-practices were followed throughout, including the use of informed consent forms. Participants' confidentiality continues to be protected in this report. Participant feedback presented in this report has been edited to remove identifiable traits and only aggregate survey results are shared. We cannot present demographic-based outcomes because it would identify participants.

## WHY PARTICIPANTS SHOWED UP

A very common reason from interview participants chose to participate in City Shapers was because they had a high level of previous interest in CityHive or the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Those who did not have prior knowledge of the organizations came to the program through the recommendations of people they trusted who did know CityHive. Based on what we heard from interviews, some may have been interested in the specific topics, but most joined because of prior knowledge and respect for the organizations involved. CityHive's strong and positive community reputation was a clear attraction for City Shaper participants.

Based on our interviews and pre-survey results, City Shapers tended to attract young adults who were already motivated to participate in democracy and their communities. Across all three cohorts, interview participants mentioned wanting to meet peers who may have a similar interest in change and volunteering. They were a group of already committed and democratically active individuals looking to meet others like them.

*"I was interested in joining because I really respect the work of the CityHive program and the work that the Centre for Dialogue does. It was also a low barriers kind of initiative in terms of time commitments being six weeks. So, it was something that I was really interested in and was easy to say yes to." – Cohort 1*

Figure 1 Level of participation in each activity by City Shaper participants the year prior to the program compared to the national average participation for 18-30 year olds.

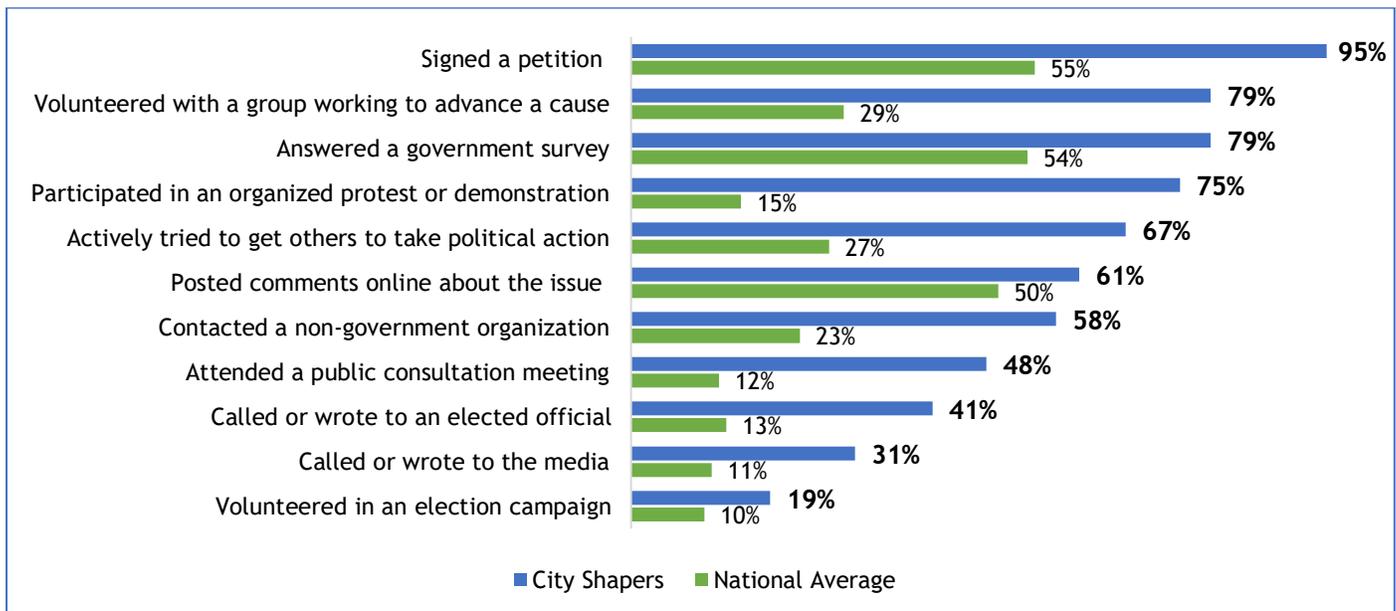


Figure 1 depicts the percentage of City Shaper participants that have participated in each democratic activity in the past year, compared to the national average level of participation by 18-30 year olds.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 demonstrates that City Shaper participants are significantly more active than their peers. Throughout the analysis, we looked at these traits and participants' expectations to help interpret the results. We believe the participants' prior interests, commitment to community engagement and expectations of the program can explain many of this report's findings.

<sup>1</sup> Data using Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative's 2019 national poll results, n=498 for 18-30 year olds.

## Expectations

When asked about their expectations for the program, most said they hoped it would decrease their isolation and help them gain experience. Many interview participants were transitioning out of university and into the workforce and wanted to create new networks and find new opportunities. Below is a quote from one participant describing this transition in their social networks and democratic engagement.

*“I had just moved back here [after university] and I really wanted to meet other people in the Lower Mainland who are interested in cities and politics and youth activism. Because I don't really have that network here.” – Cohort 3*

Participants also thought the program would help them gain practical experience, knowledge and skills for the future. Some specifically said they were looking to build up their resume. Others shared their previous civic engagement they were involved in that left them wondering if they had any impact or said they did not know how to approach decision-makers or make their voice heard. They hoped City Shapers would give them the confidence and capacity to make a meaningful difference.

*“I think I always had this sort of gap in my understanding of municipal government. I think we learned a lot about federal and provincial, so I was eager to get involved by that point. I think my second motivation was for the projects to generate some sort of impact in the community. I think those were two things that stood out to me.” – Cohort 2*

## STRENGTHS OF PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Interview participants tended to approve of the program's core structure with its project ideation, development, and presentation components. They also identified the visiting speakers as a highlight that equipped participants with the knowledge, connections, and confidence to participate in their communities. These core aspects combined with the opportunity to network with organizations and their peers were important experiences that empowered participants. Some participants also noted the facilitators were both role models for engaged youth and helped create safer spaces for conversation.

- Across all cohorts, 94% surveyed said Q&A breakouts with speakers helped them engage with the themes of the program
- 95% reported the guest speakers were effective
- 82% reported the final community event was effective
- 88% of participants surveyed believed discussing and hearing the views of other participants had an impact on their views on civic engagement
- 91% of participants surveyed reported City Shapers gave them a more positive view of civic engagement

## Strengths of Guest Speakers

All interview participants mentioned the speakers as a strength of the program. They appreciated interacting with the diversity of organizations and representatives from a range of civically engaged positions. Others noted that the breakouts and feedback opportunities with speakers helped make organizations and individuals seem more approachable.

**From CityHive: The program brought in guest speakers to share their expertise and experience working in fields related to city-building and the program theme (social isolation, community resilience). Throughout all three programs, participants had the opportunity to connect with academics, community organizers, and elected officials.**

Based on the interviews, the guest speaker components' strength rested in the speakers' abilities to relay new information and ideas to participants through panels and presentations, as well as through informal conversations in breakouts. The conversations left participants feeling valued and provided them with useful feedback and knowledge that empowered their ideas.

### Guests represented diverse, approachable voices working to create change

Participants specifically noted they appreciated the diversity of speakers and information shared during the program. Several reported becoming aware of new ideas and approaches and learning how different organizations went about creating change in their communities. One participant said,

*“I think it was nice that the guest speakers came from different areas. We had a councillor. We had non-profits. We had the BIA, that kind of thing. I think that showed the diversity of people. When we talk about civic engagement, a lot of the times it’s like just talking to councillors, but I think that showed that there are these other organizations who do have an impact on how cities function and how they’re set up” – Cohort 2*

The variety allowed participants to identify with different projects that aligned with their interests. Engaging with speakers throughout the program and hearing about their experiences working in government or various civil society organizations also helped participants feel more comfortable with the idea of approaching these institutions. Participants appreciated the exposure to organizations they had not previously heard of and learning how to engage with these organizations (and government). For example,

*“The biggest highlight would just be how many people are doing this work in the city and how many people care. I think there’s often so much noise that it feels a little bit like everything’s broken and nobody’s working to fix it. Getting to be in a space for six weeks where all we talked about were the people who were working to fix it and how we could also work to fix it was huge-- it really changed my perspective on sort of what is going on in the City.” -Cohort 1*

Learning from speakers that they were not alone in their passions or different effective engagement methods emboldened individuals in each Cohort. Participants also reported the City Shapers program empowered them by providing a space that informed them about how much current work is being done related to civic engagement.

### Having honest conversations with decision-makers

Participants appreciated the conversational structure of their interactions with speakers, especially city councillors. They felt they gained insider perspectives regarding complex considerations and a window into how local government works.

*“[One councillor] brought the perspective of what actually goes through a politician’s head. That was something I definitely didn’t know before. What actually goes through the mind of someone who’s creating policy in our municipal governments; what things do they weigh in*

*their head as factors that go into building a particular policy. My perspective on that was definitely challenged on certain policies.” - Cohort 2*

Participants mentioned they strongly connected with the personal perspectives and deeper engagement offered through the project feedback sessions and the informal breakout dialogues after the general speaking or panel opportunities. The effectiveness of City Shaper’s participant interactions with guest speakers is exemplified in this participant response:

*“The end session especially where they brought in councillors and other people and some of the guest speakers, I think that solidified that this is a viable way to engage in civic issues. I think it was really affirming to hear a councillor coming and say these things to us. We need to hear them and it needs to come from you so we can bring it to people.” - Cohort 2*

Overall, the engagement with councillors alongside other community leaders seemed to leave a substantial impact on the participants, and some pointed out that it was a valuable positive interaction with officials that is rare for most people. Having elected officials and other speakers provide feedback, answer questions and have informal conversations in breakout sessions allowed participants to feel heard and empowered.

## STRENGTHS OF PROJECT WORK

Another key component of City Shapers was the group project. Unlike a university course, the project was not for grades but was driven by passion and the collaboration of young people towards a common goal of social change.

**From CityHive: City Shapers was built on a knowledge-to-action framework. After spending several sessions learning about the program theme and city-building, participants formed project groups to put their learning to use. Their projects allowed them to enact some of the change they planned to create for their communities. Each cohort had slightly different project guidelines, allowing each group to create unique deliverables ranging from policy recommendations to app prototypes to events.**



While most interview participants talked about the guest speakers, several interview participants also reported the group project was valuable in developing meaningful personal connections, applying their learnings, and expanding their practical understanding of government and community engagement.

### Working with peers

The interview participants noted that being in a room full of diverse peers who shared an interest in civic engagement was one of the program's significant strengths. They appreciated the opportunity to work in small groups and get to know and learn from one another. A participant from Cohort 2 described,

*"I would say the most impactful experience was the conversations with my team because we all brought such unique perspectives. We had someone who was actually in a youth policy program who had studied how to make policy. We had an individual who was working in a not-for-profit organization who brought that perspective and how they try to bring about change in the community." - Cohort 2*

Teams utilized the diverse experiences of group members allowed and skillsets to collaborate and learn from each other.

During interviews, expressions of confidence and empowerment were often attributed to being surrounded by capable and passionate peers within the City Shapers cohort. For example:

*"I think seeing the individuals around me being just as passionate as I am about it almost reinforced the fact that change in democratic engagement or changes in the way that we do democratic engagement are possible. I think it sort of eliminated the bits of pessimism that I had beforehand about the whole process" (CS-229)*

Project work with peers helped participants learn from each other to impart motivation and practical skills to tackle their cities' issues.

### Focusing on solutions-oriented ideation

Interview participants noted they appreciated working together to develop a project idea and think through how they could execute it. They enjoyed the solutions-oriented focus that helped them connect and learn from each other about topics that interested them.

*"Reflecting back on it, I think I appreciate [the project work] because— especially coming from an academic background— you spend so much time critiquing and analyzing and finding all the bad things. It was really nice to be given this space to envision what we want to see post-recovery or as the pandemic is winding down." - Cohort 2*

Participants reported the group project provided the most significant opportunity to develop connections, and some chose to continue their project in part because of the network they created with peers.

*"My group specifically is choosing to move forward with our project, so hopefully that will become something that will have some ties with the community and has regular events." - Cohort 1*

## STRENGTH OF PRESENTATIONS

Interview participants said the final presentations were an enjoyable experience that created a valuable space for feedback from peers, mentors, and guests.

**From CityHive: In order to share out the youth participants' projects and ideas, each program culminated in a final public event. Each group had the opportunity to present their project, followed by breakout discussions where attendees could ask more in-depth questions and offer their input. Decision-makers and community organizers were invited in as witnesses to bring their reflections back into their respective fields.**

Participants appreciated the visibility and feedback the experience created and to hear other ideas from their cohort.



## Learning from others

Given the size of Cohort 2 and 3 in the online environment, participants did not get to interact with peers outside their group as often as an in-person program would have allowed. The presentations were an opportunity for cohort members to learn about other group's ideas and projects, which the participant response below describes as a highlight of the program.

*“The final presentations were memorable for me because I was actually able to see visually a little bit of what was created in each group and how so much work was being done behind the scenes that I didn’t get to see throughout some of the middle sessions of the program. Because everyone was working in their own teams. So that was memorable for me to see everyone’s work come to fruition in that sense.” – Cohort 2*

Cohort 3 members specifically mentioned they appreciated being able to see Cohort 2 presentations. It provided a better understanding of the intent and outcomes of their program. To summarize, one participant noted,

*"Highlight was probably the final presentations; watching the previous cohort group and our group presentations. Just because they were all very different and they all presented a really exciting vision for something they wanted to achieve." - Cohort 3*

## Opportunities for feedback

The presentation added value because it was an opportunity to hear feedback from previous guest speakers as well as city and community stakeholders. Participants appreciated being able to interact with guests as they developed their projects and hear feedback at the final presentations. A participant in Cohort 3 explained why:

*"It was validating to hear the back and forth we started to have [with guests] about how excited they were about our project. They were saying, "here's my email. Contact me; let's have a conversation about this. I'd love to help." I think that validation was really nice and marked a particular thing on my checklist for engaging and seeing how I can fit in with a professional already involved with community resilience." - Cohort 3*

The participant feedback below highlights that the presentations elevated the City Shaper program's stakes and provided an opportunity for groups to commit and make the projects real.

*"[Our presentation] was also a good shared experience with the rest of the cohort just going through that event and having everyone present. I think that's a marker of a transition. Now that those ideas are public, those ideas were set in stone, at least at that moment, so I feel like that was really exciting, really healthy. My team did, like, a lot of celebrating. Just being excited about each other." - Cohort 3*

As the pinnacle of the program, presentations marked the end of many participants' involvement. However, a few who volunteered to be interviewed did mention that teams had plans to continue the work or were motivated to explore other individual opportunities to stay involved.

## WEAKNESSES OF THE PROGRAM

While many interview participants were able to name key takeaways from the program, these same individuals and others explained what they saw as weaknesses for the program. Some noted their opinions were because they came to the program with certain expectations based on how City Shapers was advertised. Others related their thoughts to areas of frustration or confusion they felt after the program ended. Additionally, participants were forgiving and supportive of the CityHive staff and their facilitation style— especially the transition to Zoom during a global pandemic. We did not find any significant results related to facilitation or the online experience that would point to them as a weakness of the program.



## Some participants found City Shapers too theoretical

The project ideation, development and feedback were noted by interview participants as a strength of the program. At the same time, a few participants expressed that the program did not produce tangible outcomes and were left a little confused as to what was next. One participant explained,

*“I don’t really know what happens now. I came up with this project that I’m working on with my group in this program and I don’t really know if we’re going to pursue the project. It’s hard to keep that momentum going. The program has ended and people are busy. It feels like a big ask to carry on a project without any security that there will be definite funding or time resources available. I’m just a little bit confused about what happens now and I’m a bit worried that some of that maybe some of it happened in vain and isn’t going to amount to anything.” - Cohort 1*

Our interviews suggest the expectations participants brought with them into the program may help explain this reaction. For example, some participants explained they had previous experience with associations that executed projects and desired to create change within a structured program. Regardless, participants shared some sadness that they felt City Shapers was only a “pitch phase.”

## Not enough formal civic education components

It appears participants learned most of their knowledge about civic engagement from guest speakers and the group project. Multiple participants stated they wished the program spent more time focused on civic education and explicit training on interacting with governments.

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*"There wasn't that much conversation about civic engagement apart from the resilience aspect of it. I don't think there was enough conversation about how we actually get there. Or if you care about these things, how do you advocate for them. I wish that there was a lot more conversation or even panels about that sort of aspect of it. What is actually out there beyond just the ballot box, beyond just calling your city councillor." - Cohort 3*

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Interview participants in every cohort expressed strong desires for more guidance and explicit learning, with examples, on how exactly to advocate to decision-makers and the details of how local government works.

## SURVEY OUTCOMES

Surveys conducted before and after programs can show what kind of impact, change in opinion or behaviour a program can produce. Thus they are often used for program evaluations. However, City Shaper's participants identified so strongly in their commitment to democracy and civic engagement before the program that there was almost no change visible in post-surveys. The only area that showed a positive change was how participants rated their understanding of civic engagement and city functions, as displayed in Figure 2-4.

Figure 2 % of participants that are knowledgeable about the role cities play in relation to different issues.

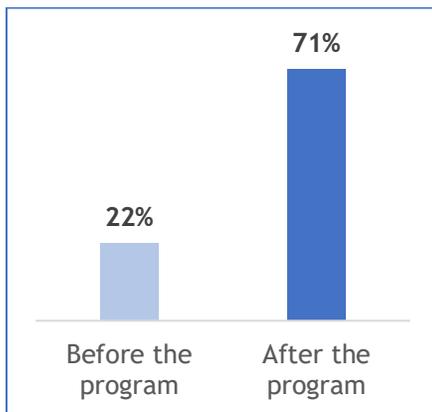


Figure 3 % of participants that are knowledgeable about Civic Engagement

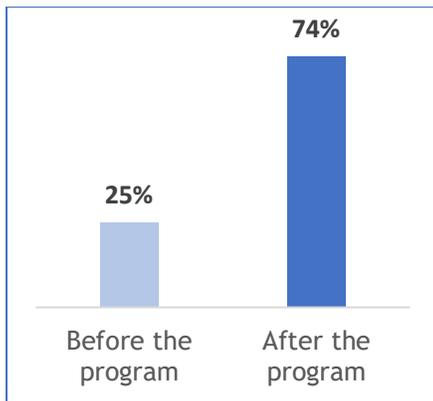


Figure 4 % of participants that are knowledgeable about Cities

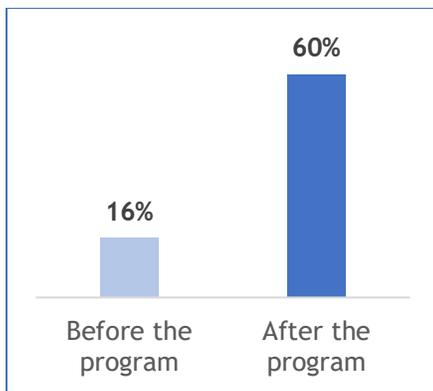


Figure 5 % of participants that trust each democratic actor

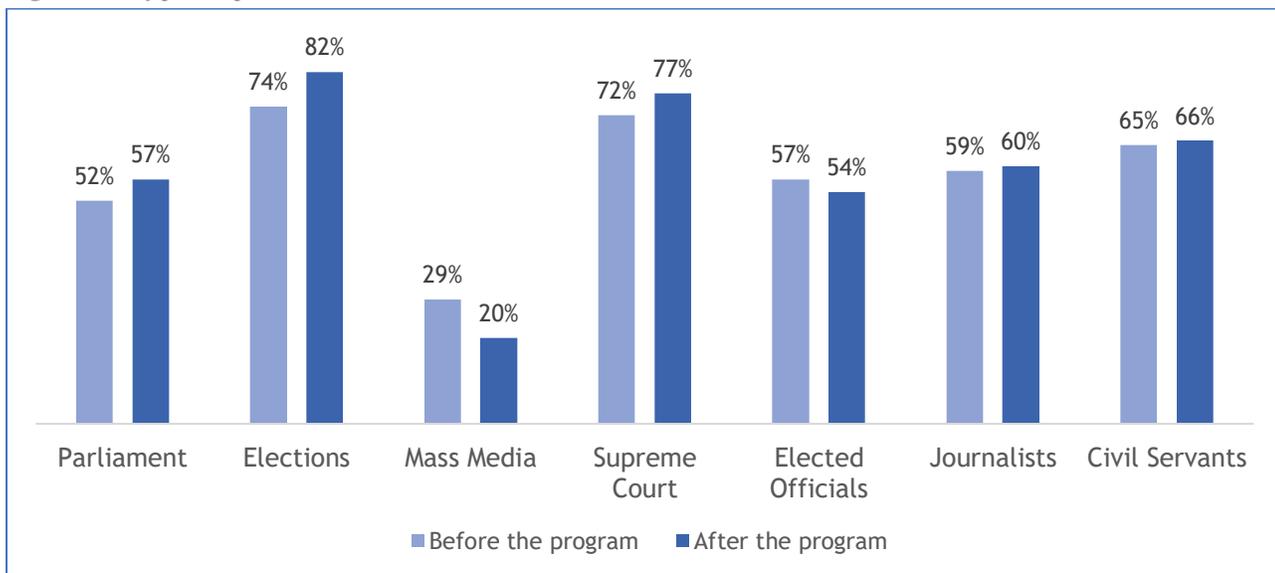


Figure 5 illustrates the changes to reported trust in democracy, elected officials, the impact of voting and other opinions were statistically insignificant and unchanged.

While program developers hope for change after an intervention like City Shapers, these results were unsurprising to the evaluators because participant opinions were so strong before the program. The strong interest and participant at the beginning of the program as depicted in Figure 1 combined with the strong increase in knowledge demonstrated in Figures 2-4 support the need for more opportunities like City Shapers for young adults to learn and get involved.

Figure 6 Participants perspective on whether citizens have the ability to influence government

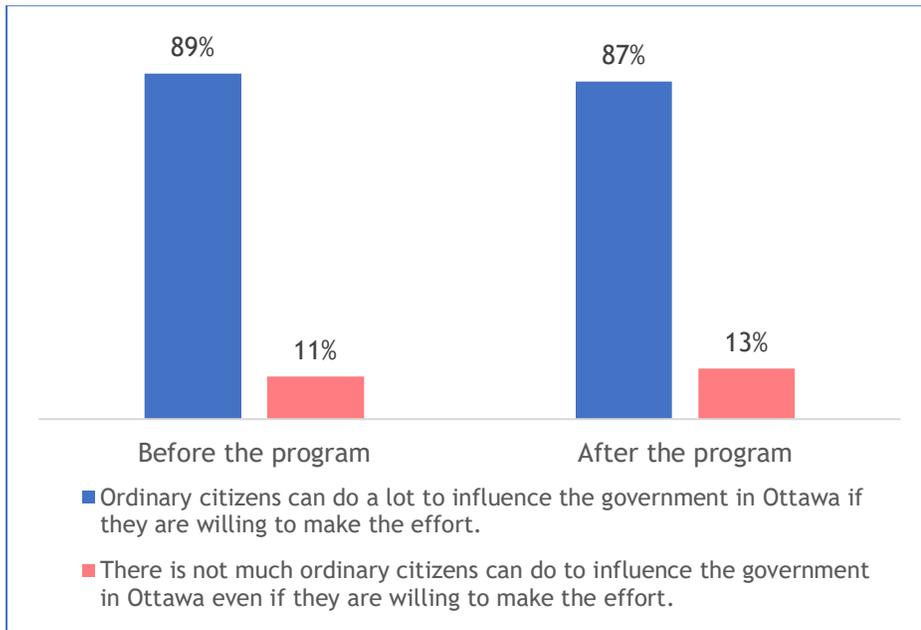


Figure 7 Participants perspective on whether citizens have the ability to influence government

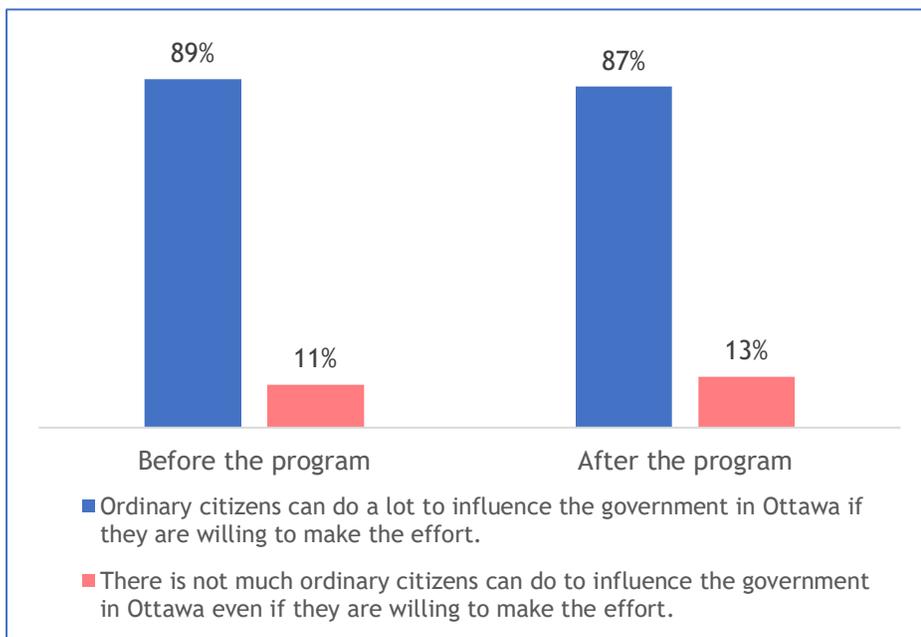
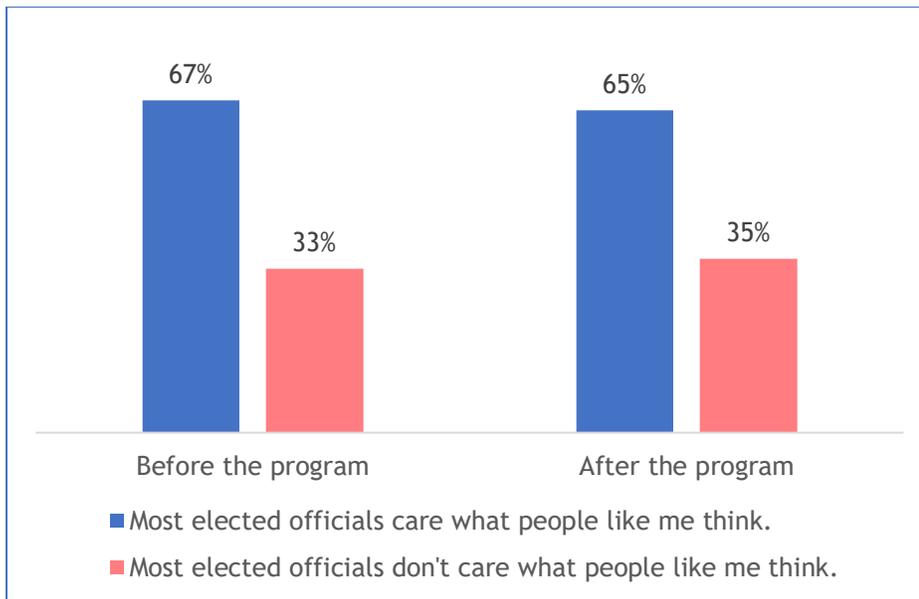


Figure 8 Participants perspective on whether elected official care



## OVERALL TAKEAWAYS FROM CITY SHAPERS

### More confidence for growing professional networks

Participants felt City Shapers and CityHive helped cultivate the relationships between external organizations and speakers. Participants said they felt the guest speakers they interacted with could help them build a professional network, gain the confidence to reach out to others, and increase their willingness to take on future projects. During interviews, participants shared that communicating with elected officials and other influential guests allowed them to feel more willing and confident to reach out and network with contacts that were not part of the City Shapers program.

*"I feel like I do have more opportunities to make connections. I can reach out to all those guest speakers, for instance, and then try to establish some sort of networking opportunities through them." - Cohort 2*

### Experience in diverse collaborations among peers

Participants also described the personal connections they made as one of the highlights of the program. The diversity of participants in the program also created lasting learnings. Participants frequently stated that they were inspired and empowered to get more involved as a result of hearing the different actions taken by their fellow cohort members, particularly group members. Participants seemed to appreciate City Shapers providing a unique opportunity to interact with like-minded young adults across diverse backgrounds who otherwise never would have met.

*"It was really evident that the people selected were intentionally carrying really diverse identities. I found that resonated with me and heavily impacted this program. Because that's rare to be in spaces that are full of different identities that are not the dominant identities. I found there were a lot of really great suggestions on how to collaborate with others." - Cohort 3*

## Opportunity to practice broadly transferable skills

Many participants reported City Shapers provided broadly transferrable skills and knowledge that they could apply in future opportunities. Those interviewed who specifically focused on their career development seemed to appreciate the opportunity to strengthen their resume. Other participants emphasized that City Shapers developed their teamwork, communications, and project management abilities.

*“Well, it’s definitely going on the resume. It’s definitely more tailored towards communications, public engagement, discussing policy issues and pushing forward and reaching out to contacts that are policy and change-makers. So that’s definitely a knee up and hopefully a boost to potential prospects of employment. That’s also one of the reasons why I joined City Shapers. I need to get a job in my field.” - Cohort 2*

## More understanding of cities and policy process

Survey results showcase that participants significantly increased their understanding of civic engagement and the role of cities. More specifically, participants reported that they expanded their skills and knowledge on how to impact and influence government due to the City Shapers program.

Many participants reported that they were more confident that they knew where to go, who to talk to, and how to talk to them to influence government. Participants emphasized the guest speakers were the specific program component that most instilled this knowledge, and then the group project was where they were able to apply it directly.

*“We tried to put forward policy recommendations that were very rooted and grounded. For us to do that we needed to do a lot of research on our topic, because we understood that if they saw that we understand the issue the way they understand the issue, we would have a better chance of trying to influence [government] thinking.” - Cohort 2*

## Learned how to strategically communicate with government

Interview participants said they learned to be strategic in how they present their ideas to impact government. Some participants described that strategic communications would reduce the likelihood of the City ignoring their argument and perspective. This learning generated both optimism and pessimism from participants. Some were optimistic that they could effectively influence government with this knowledge, but for others, knowing about the ‘selective hearing’ of decision-makers also made barriers more apparent for them.

*“I learned that politicians have selective hearing. If you want to influence the government, you have to do it in a very particular way. I think that’s what I’ve learned now is advocacy is just advocacy unless it’s tied with the right language, communicated to the right individuals and people who are actually going to want to see the change enacted at the highest level.” - Cohort 2*

## CONNECTIONS TO DEMOCRACY?

After completing the City Shapers program, participants expressed a range of perspectives regarding the connection between their experiences in the program and their views on democracy. Some positive, some less so.

Many shared that the program had increased their optimism and confidence in influencing the government by creating a positive experience that increased their knowledge. For example:

*“I would say that it expanded my knowledge base, so now when I go into the conversation, I’m more prepared. I can see that conversation being a little bit more long-lasting because I would be able to sustain it based on what I know now.” - Cohort 2*

However, some participants also reported that their perspectives on democracy and civic engagement were mostly unchanged by the program. When asked about the program impacts on their engagement, one participant replied:

*“I think probably a bit more. It didn’t, like, blow my mind and switch me from being unengaged to engaged. But as someone who’s already fairly engaged, it increased it a bit even from that.” - Cohort 1*

Among those who reported an increased level of confidence or motivation to engage, participants often attributed the change to their peers, increased their knowledge of civic engagement and governance, and broadened their perspectives on how to get involved.

*“The program motivated me to create my own opportunities for engagement in that, like, it really did show me that if there’s a policy I think is bad or if cities are doing something I think is wrong, I can research it and figure it out and create an action plan to address it.” - Cohort 3*

Participants like this drew connections between the program and their motivations for ongoing democratic practice. Aligned with their expectations and reasons to sign up, these participants expressed openness to continued involvement around issues that mattered to them in their communities.

Yet, as mentioned elsewhere in the report, other participants had trouble drawing connections between democratic culture and civic engagement. They remained unclear on how exactly to participate and create change. One participant from Cohort 1 even pushed back on the connections between the program and democracy.

*“Democracy is a thing that I’m struggling to define in this context. Yeah, it’s maybe just not the word that I would use for what we learned about.” - Cohort 1*

Based on what participants said in interviews and the survey results, we found mixed results related to the program’s impact on the participants’ thinking about democracy. The cohort’s different topics cohorts and other variations such as different guest speakers and the unique open-ended conversations may explain the results.

Overall it must also be noted that except when intentionally prompted, almost no one interviewed used the word “democracy” to describe the program, choosing instead to express their thoughts through the framework of “civic engagement.” To better understand these results, we looked through the interviews to

see how participant's comments might align with the Strengthening Canadian Democracy Initiative's *Five Principles for Democratic Engagement* and found the following:

<b>Principles for democratic engagement programs</b>	<b>Interview Findings</b>
<p><b>Build capacity to participate</b></p> <p><i>grow the capacity of government and citizens to engage and participate</i></p>	<p>Participants shared many descriptions of their increase in confidence and capacity to influence government. They also shared a desire to learn more about how exactly local government works.</p>
<p><b>Foster commitment to democratic values</b></p> <p><i>share our commitment to democratic values and feelings of ownership over our democratic system</i></p>	<p>While participants talked a lot about creating change in their communities, they almost never framed their thinking via democratic values such as equality, rule of law, civic duty, tolerance, etc. They maintained optimistic, but mixed opinions about their ownership over the democratic system itself.</p>
<p><b>Deepen relationships and social connections</b></p> <p><i>increase respect and feelings of connections between each other</i></p>	<p>Participants loved getting to know like-minded young adults in their cohorts and learning from their peers. They found networking within the cohorts and with the different organizations that visited the program to be a highlight of City Shapers and one of the key takeaways.</p>
<p><b>Be equitable and caring</b></p> <p><i>better co-create solutions by taking steps to understand and provide what diverse participants need to feel supported and know that they matter</i></p>	<p>Some participants mentioned they noticed and appreciated the diversity of participants and recognized that the program prioritized using justice and equity frameworks in their process. The program's guest speakers often helped participants feel empowered.</p>
<p><b>Establish accountability</b></p> <p><i>earn trust by being responsive and accountable to peoples' needs and expectations</i></p>	<p>We have not included a comprehensive review of the facilitators in this report because most interview participants chose to focus on the structure of the program, and not its facilitators, when they talked about City Shapers. A few however, did mention the facilitators were respectful and adapted the program to participant's needs, especially over zoom. Being willing to participate in this evaluation is also an act of accountability by CityHive.</p>

The *Five Principles of Democratic Engagement* helps unpack the complexity of democracy into some core principles. The principles align with different programming objectives that strengthen democratic culture and participation. We chose to include them here because participant opinions and stories during the interviews often aligned with these five principles and objectives— even though City Shapers was created before the development of these principles and CityHive did not use them to construct their programming. Based on the interviews, City Shapers increased participants' optimism and capacity to participate in the practices that define our local democracies. Results also point towards the opportunity for future programs to engage more directly with democracy by naming its values and core competencies in alignment with the program's activities.

## SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report provides a glimpse into the opinions and experiences of City Shaper's participants. As analysis insights revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the program, diverse and actionable suggestions emerged:

### **Create more formal civic education components:**

Some participants held a strong expectation that they would be learning more about how to navigate city processes. They left the program feeling like they did not gain as much as they expected in this area. Based on these suggestions, we recommend adding a more formal, step-by-step teaching component to help participants better understand local government.

### **Make overt connections to democratic cultural competencies, processes, values:**

Our evaluation found that most of the levels of democratic commitment among participants were unchanged by the program. During interviews, some participants also resisted a connection between City Shapers and democracy in general, choosing to focus on civic engagement. To help normalize and build trust in democracy in Canada, we recommend inserting overt connections for participants between their work in the program and key competency of democracy such as flexibility, evidence-informed advocacy, and multicultural knowledge.

### **Find ways to create more time in the program:**

One of the most popular suggestions from participants in *any* program is a request for more time. It was the same for City Shapers. More time for conversations, project work and presentations were suggested by different participants. The online cohorts also expressed that they felt the program was too compressed over too short a time. Some suggested holding more than one session a week would be helpful.

### **Design a follow-up activity to encourage participants to continue their projects:**

Participants appreciated the project ideation, but some also felt let down that the program did not allow them to participate directly in creating tangible change. They also felt there was no structure to continue the work. Participants suggested hosting some follow up event months later to encourage groups to continue working on their projects independently after the program. A later touchpoint could be an opportunity to engage the CityHive alumni network.

### **Create more “solutions-oriented” programming for younger adults:**

Data from the evaluation suggest an appetite among young adults for what they called “solutions-oriented” or knowledge-to-action based programming like City Shapers. Before the program, survey results showed participants had a strong commitment to democratic engagement, and we heard in interviews that they noticed a lack of programming options for young adults. Participants mentioned there are often programs for college students, teenagers and seniors in their local communities, but few options for younger adults, which they identified as a barrier. Others noted that most educational opportunities focus on learning what is going wrong; thus participants found strength in the City Shaper’s knowledge-to-action framework and the focus on positive solutions. The participants' takeaways lead us to suggest that funders, community organizers, and communities should explore creating more solution-oriented programs for young adults to help strengthen democratic engagement and culture.

