

Utilizing democracy to
increase inclusivity

***IT'S TIME* ENGAGING METRO VANCOUVERITES ON MOBILITY PRICING**

WHO

An Argyle Company, an engagement and communications firm who supported the work of the Mobility Pricing Independent Commission.

WHAT

The *It's Time* project: A research and engagement project exploring how mobility pricing and a decongestion charge could look in Metro Vancouver to reduce congestion and raise transportation investment in a way that's more fair.

NEED

The Commission recognized that the idea of paying to use the roads was likely going to be a contentious issue in Metro Vancouver, and wanted to make sure the *It's Time* project was done with transparency and heard from diverse viewpoints.

OUTCOME

The project generated input from a diverse cross-section of more than 17,000 Vancouver residents and more than 11,000 comments online over both phases.

Objectives of the *It's Time* project



Reduce traffic congestion

on roads and bridges across the Metro Vancouver region so people and goods can keep moving, and business can thrive



Promote fairness

to address concerns around the previous approach to tolling some roads and bridges but not other, as well as providing affordable transportation choices



Support transportation investment

to improve the current transportation system in Metro Vancouver for all users

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

A SHARED COMMITMENT TO ENGAGEMENT AND TRANSPARENCY

The *It's Time* project was the public education and engagement program of the Mobility Pricing Independent Commission's work in exploring how to reduce traffic congestion throughout Metro Vancouver through a tool known as mobility pricing, and particularly, a decongestion charge. This model has been used in London, Singapore, Sweden, and is being studied in other major cities around the world.

At the outset, a public opinion poll of Metro Vancouver residents found that nearly 90 percent were frustrated by traffic delays and more than 80 percent said transportation delays resulted in lost time every week.

Context designed and delivered the integrated communications and engagement program of the *It's Time* project to reach and hear from the public, elected

officials and stakeholders. Miranda Eng, a senior consultant, realized pretty quickly that Ethelo would be a good fit to hear from more Metro Vancouver residents via online engagement.

"We were drawn to Ethelo because of our shared commitment to meaningful engagement, and transparency," Eng said. "We want people to understand and trust our engagement process and we knew that Ethelo could help us do that."

This project was one of the largest in Ethelo's history. Context and the Ethelo team were committed to working together to include as many voices as possible in the process. Those efforts, along with iteration and constant communication, made the project a success.

I think congestion is bad on and around bridges crossing the Fraser River. ^

BRIDGES CROSSING THE FRASER RIVER

This includes the Golden Ears Bridge, the Port Mann Bridge, the Pattullo Bridge, the Alex Fraser-Queensborough bridge corridor and the Massey Tunnel.

TOTALLY DISAGREE DISAGREE DONT KNOW AGREE TOTALLY AGREE

Totally Agree

PROCESS

HEARING VOICES FROM ACROSS THE COMMUNITY

The *It's Time* project was split into two phases. Phase 1 introduced the concept of mobility pricing and sought input from Vancouver residents and other stakeholders about where traffic congestion affected their lives and how the concept of fairness should be applied to mobility pricing.

Phase 2 used that input to ask for feedback on how a decongestion charge could be applied in Metro Vancouver to help the problems identified in phase 1, including changing the fuel tax, or introducing a distance-based charge or a congestion point charge.



Because public transportation can be a controversial subject, Eng and her team wanted the engagement process to be as open and transparent as possible. The Ethelo consultation was available in English, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, and Punjabi – the most commonly-spoken languages in the Metro Vancouver area.

Beyond the information collected online, the project team also distributed paper surveys to residents who had may have had less access to computers or less familiarity using them. Responses from the paper surveys were entered into Ethelo and combined with the rest of the feedback as part of the overall results.

While the translation and the paper survey initiative required extra time and energy, Eng said it was crucial and well worth the effort in order to include perspectives from all parts of the community.

“People could participate whenever and wherever they wanted, including populations who are often underrepresented in public engagement,” Eng said. “We are committed to democratic processes and want voices to be heard on projects and policies that impact them.”

RESULTS AND FEEDBACK

CAPTURING POLARIZATION AND REPORTING WITH ACCURACY

The Ethelo consultation saw participation from more than 17,000 Metro Vancouverites on four language platforms over both phases, and sparked a lively discussion among participants about what the future of transportation in Vancouver should look like.

Eng and her team monitored the comments and removed any that contained offensive language, but otherwise, let the discussion play out. Unlike in-person meetings and open houses that hear the loudest voices on a given issue, online engagement opportunities through Ethelo allow for multiple perspectives on an issue to be considered in a transparent way.

“We don’t want to sway conversation. Instead, we want to lean into both sides,” Eng said. “We don’t control the conversation or the narrative; we just let people be heard.”

And heard they were. The potential for mobility pricing in Metro Vancouver was described as everything from “just another money grab” to “another tool to encourage more sustainable modes of transportation.”

Because Ethelo allows people to comment on questions in their own words, Eng and her team were able to show the polarization that exists around these issues in their reporting. It’s one thing to read statistics about how people feel, but something else entirely to read comments expressing the emotion behind those opinions that are publicly displayed for all participants to view.

Ethelo also encouraged interaction among participants and created opportunities for dialogue around wider issues like affordability, technology changes in transportation, land use planning and accountability for taxes.

“We weren’t scared of criticism, which helped build trust in the engagement process,” Eng said. “We reported back what we heard transparently and truthfully and were able to provide insight into the levels of support and polarity based on the demographics of the people who participated.”



NEXT STEPS

The *Metro Vancouver Mobility Pricing Study: Findings and Recommendations for an Effective, Farsighted, and Fair Mobility Pricing Policy* was released in May 2018. The report, along with the and findings from the public engagement for the mobility pricing project, is available on the *It's Time* website at itstimemv.ca.

The report served as the first phase of a feasibility study that needs to be completed. From there, any new initiatives would move to policy development and implementation in a two to four year timeframe.

Regardless of how mobility pricing in Metro Vancouver moves forward, Eng hopes to work with Ethelo on additional projects to garner public input on decisions that impact their lives.

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"We have a strong relationship with Ethelo and see great opportunities ahead to work together based on the nature of the projects we're drawn to," Eng said.

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