



# **Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee 2011 Youth Forum Report**

## **Introduction & Purpose**

The City of Niagara Falls Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee (MYAC) held a Youth Forum on Saturday, April 2, 2011 at the MacBain Community Centre in Niagara Falls. The purpose of the Youth Forum was to determine the current needs of youth in Niagara Falls.

## **History**

The Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee hosted Youth Forums in 2001 and 2005.

The 2001 Youth Forum resulted in recommendations and support for a permanent concrete Skate Park. MYAC subsequently hosted public open houses and fundraised and saw the permanent Skate Park open in June 2005.

In 2005 City Council approved the preparation of an updated Strategic Plan for Parks, Recreation & Culture. With the Skate Park project nearing completion, and the opportunity to include a youth needs component in the new Strategic Plan, it was an appropriate time to host another Youth Forum.

The 2005 Youth Forum highlighted a Multi Media Arts Centre as the number one priority. In addition, a Café with Bands, Transportation, New or Improved Mall, New Arena, and Downtown improvements including Main & Ferry and Queen Streets were also indicated as important.

Since the last Youth Forum an arena has been built, major improvements are being made to Queen Street and to the Main and Ferry area, and a detailed evaluation and restructuring of City Transit is being undertaken. Consequently the 2010/2011 MYAC decided that it was timely to host a forum to determine if and how the needs of youth have changed.

## **2011 Youth Forum Process**

The 2011 MYAC Youth Forum was conducted with the assistance of a lead community volunteer, Trisha Tisi, from the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. An organic process was selected for the forum where no ideas are presented ahead of time.

Letters were sent to the principal of each of the five local high schools inviting them to participate in the Forum. The principals were asked to select 20 students from their school who represent a wide variety of interests, grades, ethnicity, in order to represent

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the full spectrum of students at their school. In total seventy six youth attended the forum.

After an initial welcome and ice breaker the youth were asked to brainstorm anything that they feel our community seemed to lack. These ideas were placed around the room on large chart paper. Once this process was complete each of the students were given three stickers to place on what they felt were the three most outstanding topics for our city. The top eight topics were selected for further discussion. Each student was able to take part in the discussion of three topics.

The eight top ideas were taken from the forum and put online on the MYAC website ([www.nfmyac.com](http://www.nfmyac.com)) where students from all across the city, regardless of whether or not they were attendees of the forum, were able to vote for their top two ideas.

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**Initial Brainstorm and Votes**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Votes</b>
Youth Friendly Transit System	43
Transportation	0
Rest Stations for locals	1
Ski Hill or Shuttle to Ski Hill	0
A better teen hangout	11
Make more roller coasters in Marineland	2
More badminton courts	1
Dog park	4
More co-op opportunities that have to do with the field that students want to be in	9
A Graffiti Building	13
Interrelated school events - high schools in Niagara Falls planning events together	5
Sports - more recreational teams and less expensive travel teams	2
Youth lack motivation	4
Go Train	4
Not enough cheap activities to do in the winter	1
Public outdoor pools	6
Musician Investment	7
International airport	3
Teen to Teen Support - helping teens talk about their problems to another teen anonymously	6
Better library	2
Bike paths	13
Language department	8
Bigger, better mall/Improved Niagara Square	32
Outdoor Sports Complex	23
More of a connection with cities across the border	1
A program in high schools where local businesses inform students about jobs and employment opportunities	11
Better ball hockey rinks	0

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### Discussion Group Results

#### **Bike Path:**

Many students suggested the creation of more bike paths for two reasons: a means of transportation and the recreational wants and needs of not only the youth, but all citizens and visitors of Niagara Falls. Having more bike paths can positively affect everyone including the elderly, business owners, youth jobs, parents etc. Some of these key roads/areas mentioned include Lundy's Lane, around the Falls, the Gorge, Whirlpool Road, and areas around the Escarpment. Having bike paths connected to the road would be easy to maintain in the winter, as the roads are already sanded and paved. This could also be more convenience to motorized wheelchairs and people walking on the sidewalk. Bike paths can also provide easy, green transportation.

#### **Co-op Opportunities:**

The information gathered from the discussion states that students are more likely to stay in Niagara Falls if they are provided with more co-op opportunities that apply to their future job careers. There is a great deal of competition between high school students and university students when it comes to finding a co-op placement. Many companies tend to give co-op to university students because they are older and therefore, more knowledgeable about the positions; however, high school students need to learn about what they're interested in before they enter university. The discussion also consisted of ideas for the future such as summer co-op or co-op outside of school with provided transportation. Also, a co-op fair with businesses from Toronto would be beneficial because they would be able to recruit co-op students for a variety of jobs.

#### **Outdoor Sports Complex:**

There are a number of young people who are looking for an outlet to practice healthy, active lifestyles in an outdoor environment. The lack of soccer, football and rowing facilities alone discourage a wide sector of active youth.

Niagara Falls needs a place where all the youth can get involved. Amenities such as pavilions, courts, fields, baseball diamonds and pools would allow this sense of community to develop. The complex also allows opportunity for the following:

- Employment opportunities
- Food stands
- Booster Juice, Subway
- Drive-in theatres
- Skating rink

The facility can be booked by schools, organizations and the public. Major events can be held at the Complex as it would work on a scheduled basis. Usage would work on a day pass basis.

Students need an outlet to be innovative and creative which can be produced through the designing and building of this complex. Restoring an older building will introduce more cost effectiveness than building entirely from scratch. A potential location for this complex is beside the Gale Center. To reduce financial strain on the City, the building should look towards a sponsor as other community centers have in the past.

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### **Teen Hangout:**

A place for teenagers to hangout with friends on the weekends and during the week, the space would be open to all, as a place to socialize and meet new people. With a stage and sound equipment, the space could be used as a weekend concert venue for local bands or for art/film festivals. The space would have video games, pool, table tennis, computers, music, movies, couches, an area for homework and meetings and a snack bar. The space would be staffed by hired professionals and youth volunteers. This facility could be located on Queen Street or in the Niagara Square. All in all, this would be an excellent alternative to hanging out at Tim Hortons!

### **Graffiti Building:**

In an attempt to deter vandalism, a dedicated Graffiti wall was proposed, where artists can express themselves without fear of criminal consequence. The wall would be promoted as an outlet for positive expression and would exist only on the unwritten rules against racist, violent or hurtful art. Open to all, the wall would be painted over after a certain period of time to allow for a fresh canvas. Painting over would be done by student volunteers. The wall could be located downtown on Queen Street, at the Niagara Square, the skate park or on an abandoned building with permission to do so.

### **Youth Friendly Transit System:**

The public transit system of Niagara Falls is in need of some changes to make it more youth-friendly. The stops should be more frequent (every half hour instead of once an hour) and closer to areas where easy bus access is necessary and should be more structured around the secondary school hours. Every winter break and March break, the Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee initiates a 25 cent bus rides in partnership with Niagara Transit. Bus fare discounts should be initiated more frequently. Intercity transportation via bus should also be more user and cost friendly. The operating hours of the information office should also be extended and improved. A system should be implemented allowing students to have access to more useful menu options when the Transit office closes. Others suggestions included having an interactive map on the website where students can enter position A and position B and the system would tell them exactly which routes to be looking at.

### **Promotion of Student Employment in High Schools:**

The teens want to see more staff of the high schools get involved with the job hunt process. Instead of hosting a job fair for the summer season, why not have a job fair at the beginning of the year for those who want to have a job year round. An information board about local business' hiring is helpful as well. Instead of announcements about job opportunities, have posters around the school where students are more likely to notice and know what is going on. Also, for those teens who work, but may not have transportation, have an option of a transit program that is user friendly and reasonably priced.

### **Improving Niagara Square:**

The Niagara Square is in need of new shopping venues; in particular, venues that are attractive to the youth. The youth of Niagara Falls have a need for a proper shopping outlet within the city. The Pen Centre in St. Catharines is limited to only those who have the transportation to and from the mall. The Niagara Square should be a multi-purpose

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mall, with not only shopping venues but activities (i.e. an arcade; a mini sports service of some sort). Special events during the holiday season should also be hosted. The interior and exterior of the mall should be more aesthetically pleasing.

### Youth Forum Evaluation Results

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|-----|---|-------------|
| 1.  | Were the session objectives defined, clarified and fulfilled?   | <b>4.55</b> |
| 2.  | Was the session leader easy to understand?  | <b>4.96</b> |
| 3.  | Was the session leader inspiring?   | <b>4.31</b> |
| 4.  | Did you feel you were able to express your opinion?   | <b>4.87</b> |
| 5.  | How would you rate the length of the session?   | <b>4.23</b> |
| 6.  | Was the forum well organized?   | <b>4.75</b> |
| 7.  | Was the forum interesting?  | <b>4.85</b> |
| 8.  | Was the forum worthwhile?   | <b>4.91</b> |
| 9.  | How would you rate the City's Recreation services for youth?  | <b>3.94</b> |
| 10. | <i>The best thing about the forum was:</i> meeting people, hearing other people's ideas, group discussions, group presentations, having our voices heard, getting us to express our ideas, served its purpose very well, ice breaker, the group activity, the Mayor's speech and free food.   |             |
| 11. | <i>What I enjoyed least about this forum was:</i> the length of the forum itself, unrealistic ideas, the length of the presentations, icebreakers, the waiting between events, some concepts were unorganized, we had to stand during lunch, some groups were too large, not everyone chose to participate and outline the need for ideas/programs before hand. .   |             |
| 12. | <i>What advice would you give the organizers if they were to do this forum again?</i> Do it the same way, get more interesting icebreaker games, stay positive and energetic, group discussion should be more in depth, cut down the length of the session, to focus on problems in the community, make it more faster paced, allow all members to participate, more breaks, organize the groups better, presenters should be the MYAC members, invite more kids, more activities, videos, more advertising, the leaders should incorporate their ideas into the discussion and space everything out. |             |
| 13. | <i>What services do you utilize?</i> YMCA, skate park, Niagara transit, Cineplex, Niagara Square, 25 cent bus rides, library, arena, tennis courts, bike paths, badminton club, MYAC events, parks, pools, Gale center, Macbain center, Queen Street, Dufferin Island, local restaurants, Commisso's.   |             |

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### **Online Survey Results and Final Recommendations**

The top eight topics from the Youth Forum were included in a survey and posted on the MYAC website. Eighty-three youth voted on the topic that was most important to them.

From the final web survey, MYAC concluded that the youth of Niagara Falls believe that the upcoming committee, in partnership with the City, should focus on the following three issues:

1. Improving the entertainment and retail options within Niagara Square
2. Building a more youth friendly transit system
3. Building a more entertaining place where teenagers can participate in leisure activities.

The results of the Youth Forum will be shared with City Council, Community Partners, Principals of the local high schools, and all appropriate City Departments. Specifically, the Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee will be contacting responsible persons of Niagara Square and Niagara Transit to notify them of what the youth have outlined.

Finally, the results of the Youth Forum and Online Survey will be used to pass down to the upcoming Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee of 2011-2012 so that they can better advocate for their fellow youth members within their community.