

Engaging the Entire Community to Find the Ideal Candidate for City Manager

The City of Cambridge committed to engaging the public in its hiring of a new City Manager



With their current City Manager, Louis A. DePasquale, retiring in early July of 2022, the City of Cambridge, MA announced that it would be hiring a new City Manager to take his place by June. Because the City Manager controls the budget and implements the City's policies and ordinances, their daily decisions impact all the residents of Cambridge.

For this reason the Cambridge Mayor's Office committed to hearing from the community with a robust engagement process in January and February 2022. The goal was to engage stakeholders, residents, and employees through a combination of a dedicated project website on the coUrbanize platform, focus groups, and Town Hall meetings and then incorporate that feedback into a Leadership Profile for the job candidate.



Making a blind process more transparent

For previous candidate search processes, the Mayor's office had worked with third-party search firms to hold 8-10 community meetings as well as meet with individual department heads and create surveys.

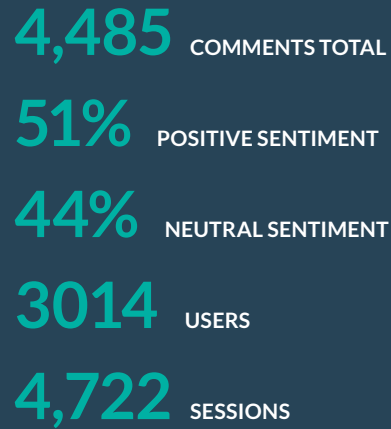
"With COVID, we had to really shift our thinking, and we were on a tight timeframe to get this done," says Vice Mayor Alanna Mallon. "We also started to realize that most people don't know what a City Manager does, so we saw this as an opportunity to educate the public. In reality, the City Manager has more power than the Mayor."

During previous surveys, results were often not shared with the public, and responders had no way of seeing others' comments. Additionally, previous city websites took many weeks to build and were not dynamic or responsive. According to Mallon, the Mayor's Office saw the City Manager search as a unique opportunity to create a more transparent process and start a dialogue with the Cambridge community.

"We tend to do engagement in a very prescribed, non-modern way that elevates the same handful of people," she says. "We wanted to reach a much broader audience and receive richer feedback."



An overwhelming public response



The Cambridge City Manager Search site launched on the coUrbanize platform in late January 2022, and within several days had already received more than 1,000 comments from Cambridge residents.

Prior to the site’s launch, the Mayor’s Office team had concerns that using online engagement would result in negative comments. “Our fear was that it would be like Next Door – where a post about a lost cat somehow becomes an argument about immigration and affordable housing,” says Mallon. “When you’re online, it’s so much easier to be a different person...But it didn’t transpire that way, and we were pleasantly surprised.”

Instead, they witnessed neighbors who normally would butt heads at public meetings coming to a consensus about goals

for the City and personal characteristics desired in a City leader. In addition, the amount of time that users spent engaging on the site was 2-3 times longer than the average for other projects on coUrbanize. In order to make the site as inclusive as possible, project leaders used coUrbanize’s Language Equity Plan to translate the platform into the many languages represented in the City, including Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Spanish.

“The analytics were very valuable, but people also shared really great qualitative feedback,” says Mallon. “The ability to gather quotes and feedback from people and add those directly to the job description was so helpful.”

A candidate profile shaped by participation

In total, the Cambridge City Manager project site collected 4,485 comments in just five weeks. Those comments were then summarized and incorporated into a final, 12-page Leadership Profile for the ideal candidate, with many comments quoted directly in the document.

“Residents have expressed that they have been so grateful to have new and accessible tools to communicate their thoughts

and participate in this process.” says Vice Mayor Mallon. “Participation has long been a function of privilege, and the way we were doing engagement before doesn’t feel right anymore... This was such a unique opportunity to make the process more honest, open, and transparent.”

Using coUrbanize, the City of Cambridge:

- Launched a dedicated, dynamic project website in less than two weeks
- Collected nearly 5,000 comments from Cambridge residents, making the City Manager search process more inclusive than ever
- Incorporated qualitative feedback from stakeholders into a final job description for the position



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- Alanna Mallon
Vice Mayor, City of Cambridge