

Calgary



Financial Conversations Report #2
SAVE Business Cases – Executive Summary – For Information

October 22, 2020

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Key Findings

- Both research and engagement have shown that Calgarians are not aligned on the topic of taxes and service delivery. In general, most do not want to see taxes increased beyond the current inflation rate but they also do not want to see services cut and worry how reductions in services, particularly to essential services, will impact their families and the city's vulnerable populations.
- The idea of increased user fees for non-essential services is more appealing to Calgarians but there is concern about access to services for those that cannot afford them or experience other types of barriers to using digital services, for example, limited or no access to technology or language barriers. There is also no clear consensus about what constitutes an essential service.
- The majority of Calgarians have accessed information and/or City services online. They are open to more digital services seeing this as an effective and efficient way to save money but express concerns that this could lead to reduced service levels and that digitizing more services may have a negative impact on vulnerable citizens.
- The only area of conversation that revealed a strong consensus across research, engagement and social media was around the idea of increasing Fire Service response times to save money. This is highly unpopular with many commenting that this would be irresponsible and unsafe. Some expressed that savings should be found elsewhere and some even said that they would be willing to maintain or even reduce the current Fire Service response time.

Background

In response to Council feedback in previous budget conversations, research and engagement for 2020 Financial Conversations started early this year and included greater focus on actions and strategies The City has considered to balance the budget. ALT selected SAVE initiatives as part of Wave 1 to proceed with further investigation and consideration, including utilizing Corporate Research and Engagement to seek feedback and input from Calgary's citizens. Six business cases were identified to be included in a representative telephone survey (research) and five of those were also included in online engagement via the Engage portal on Calgary.ca. Social Media monitored commentary about the four business cases selected for online engagement.

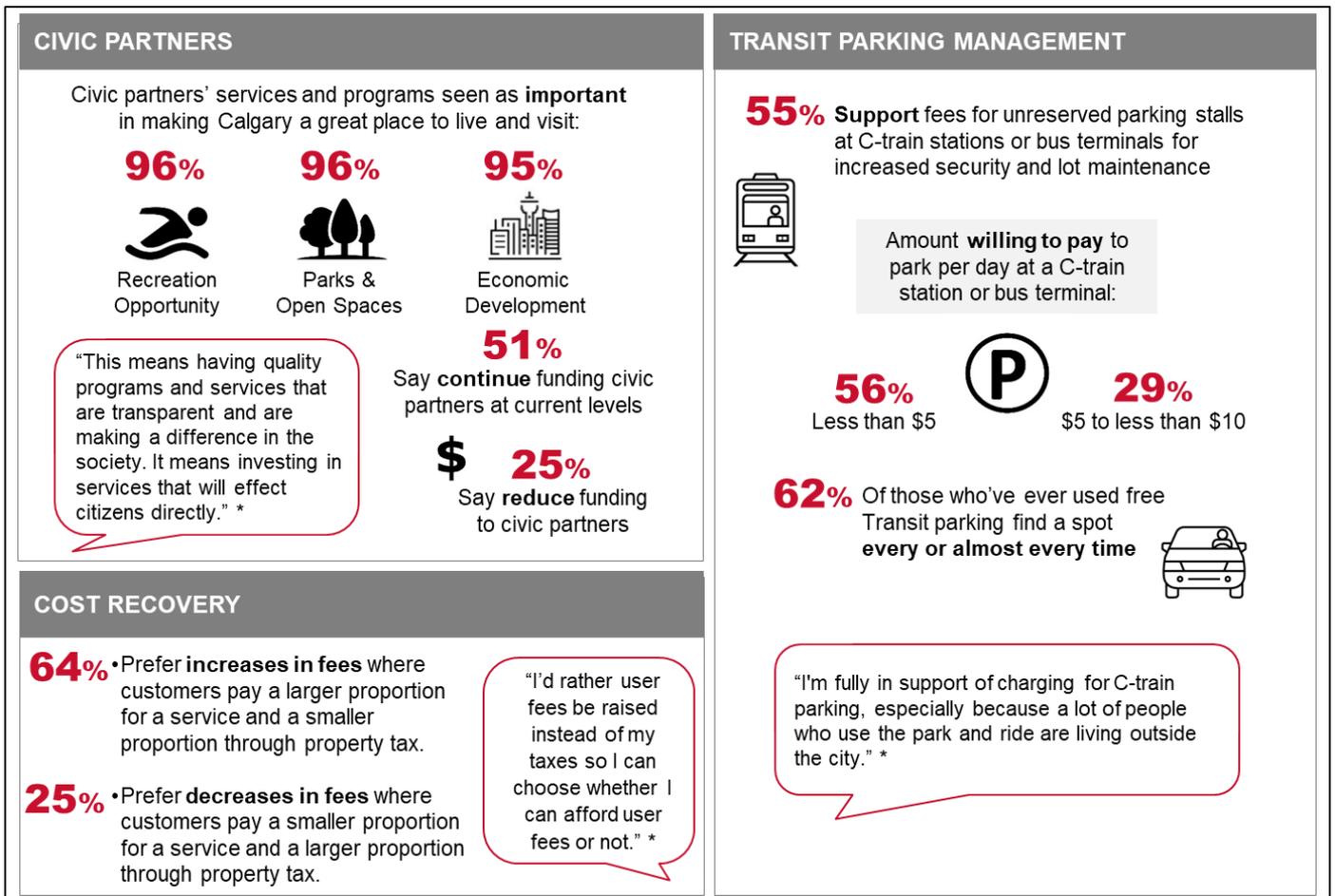
The Business Cases examined in this report include:

1. Civic Partnerships (Engage, Social Media, and Research)
2. Digital Service Enablement (Engage, Social Media, and Research)
3. Chatbots (Research)
4. Cost Recovery & User Fees (Engage Social Media, and Research)
5. Transit Parking Management (Engage and Research)
6. Fire Response (Engage, Social Media, and Research)

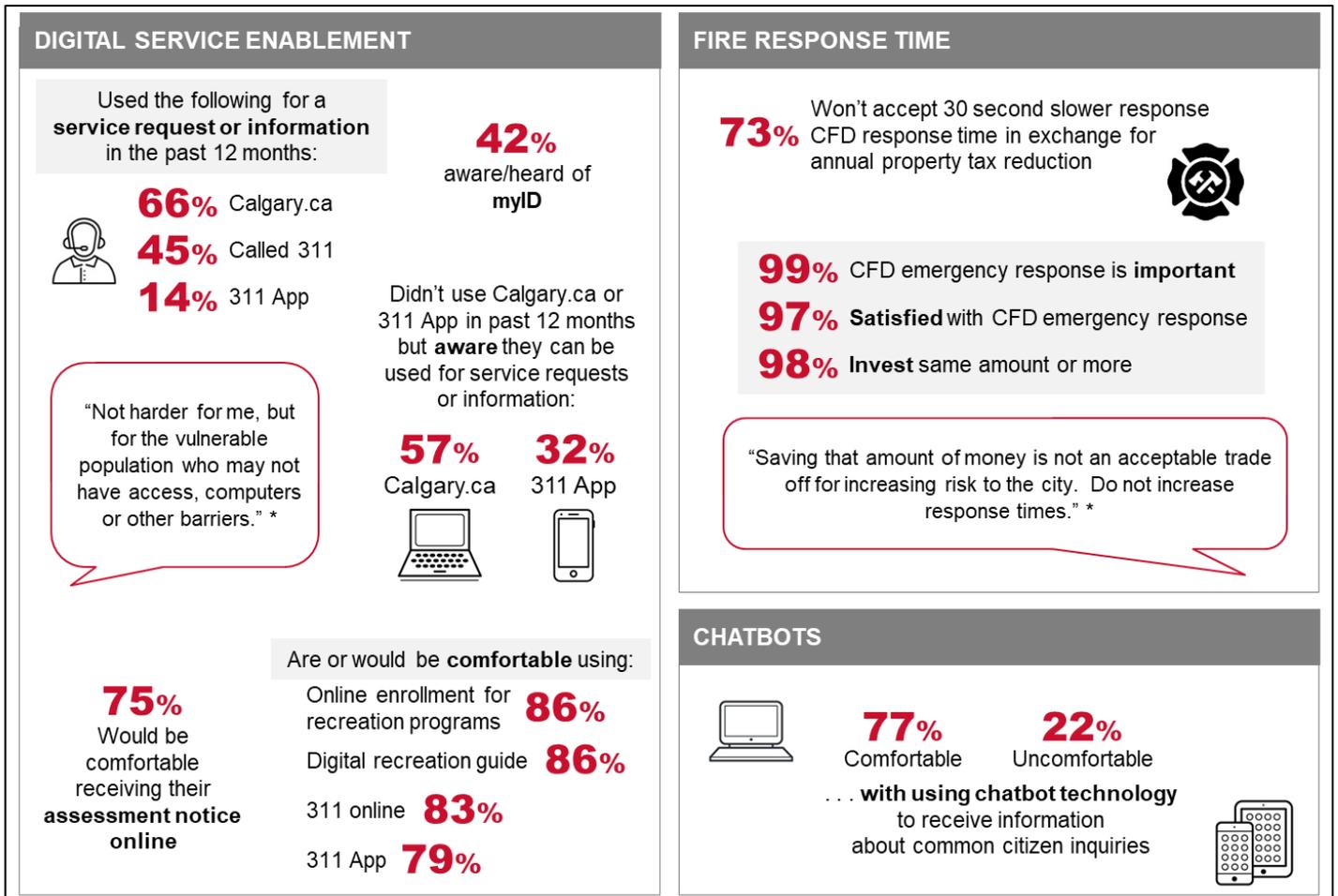
The public input from research, engagement and social media was provided to the SAVE Project Managers to inform the development of their respective business cases. As the SAVE program begins work on Wave 2, which has more initiatives that may impact citizens, additional engagement and dialogue will be conducted.

It is important to note when reading this report that polarized viewpoints are often revealed in social media posts, engagement and research with the public. At a municipal level this can be seen in discussions about service delivery and investment priorities. For example, questions around the definition of essential services, the provision of services for all, fiscal restraint, efficiency, and planning for the future can often reveal strong opinions from the public and no clear consensus.

Highlights at a Glance: Research & Engagement



*All quotations from SAVE engagement, July to August 2020.



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SAVE: Summary of Research, Engagement & Social Media Insights

Civic Partnerships

- Both research survey results and engagement findings show that civic partners offering programs and services related to parks and open spaces, recreation opportunities, and economic development are viewed as more important than others by Calgarians.
- Engagement participants spoke about the importance of recreation and parks being accessible. Many talked about the pandemic and the importance of the parks and outdoor spaces to health and wellbeing.
- The importance of civic partners involved in economic development was also part of the engagement conversations. Supporting local businesses and diversifying the local economy were the two key themes that emerged.

- Research findings further show that about half Calgarians think The City should continue funding civic partners at current levels while about one quarter think funding should be reduced. A smaller percentage think there should be increased funding or don't know. For those who think funding should be reduced or increased there was no clear consensus about whether funding changes be applied to specific organizations or across the board.
- Although this sentiment is echoed in the engagement findings, many engagement participants wanted to ensure Calgarians see “bang for their buck” – that is, maximizing value and the money received to get the most benefit for the user, while also balancing quality and affordability.

Digital Services Enablement

- When it comes to The City's digital services, survey research shows that a majority of Calgarians have accessed City services online through Calgary.ca or a City app in the past year.
- This is supported by engagement findings, where participants see the benefit, need, and necessity of these services. Many engagement participants thought that shifting services towards more of an online presence might result in a reduction in taxes and fees if The City uses the digital technology to focus on reductions and removing redundancies. The engagement also revealed concern around access to technology among disadvantaged citizens. Although volume of social media commentary around Digital Service Enablement was not high, some comments resonated with this, and highlighted a concern for those that do not have access to the internet.
- Survey research shows a majority of Calgarians are or would be comfortable using online enrollment for City recreation programs, using a digital recreation guide, using 311 online, and using the 311 app. Many engagement participants commented on the unwieldiness of the current recreation booking and registration online processes, suggesting that any online service offering needs to be clear, simple and have plain language search accessibility.
- Research results also reveal that Calgarians had several sources of information about recreation facilities and programs in the past year, with no particular source being predominant. When asked for their preferred way of getting information about recreation in Calgary, search engines (e.g. Google, Bing or Yahoo) and The City's website (Calgary.ca) top the list.

Chatbots

- Survey research shows a majority of Calgarians say they would be comfortable using chatbot technology to receive information in response to common citizen inquiries such as recreation facility locations and transit times.
- Chatbots were not part of the engagement or social media conversations.

Cost Recovery & Service Fees

- When asked about their general preferences to cover the costs of some City services funded by a combination of property taxes and direct user/service fees, the majority of Calgarians prefer The City increase user/service fees for these services and reduce the proportion paid through property tax increases; a minority would rather see a decrease in direct user/service fees and an increase in the proportion paid through property taxes.
- Paralleling the survey question, engagement participants were asked “How would an increase in user fees, where customers pay more but less is paid through property tax increases, impact you and your family?” The most common theme heard in response to this question was general support

for the idea of user fees and having users pay more of the proportion of the cost of a service. However, the next most common theme raised by participants was concern that an increase in fees would disproportionately impact low-income users and other vulnerable populations.

- Some engagement participants made a distinction between limiting any increase to basic or essential services and increasing user fees for 'optional' services. While there wasn't a clear consensus of which of the listed services would be deemed essential, limiting increases to transit fees was most commonly mentioned, followed by recreation, libraries and services that support socialization and community enhancement.

Transit Parking Management

- The survey shows just over one-half of Calgarians support implementing fees for unreserved stalls for increased security and lot maintenance, including lighting and snow clearing. A similar proportion would be willing to pay less than \$5 a day to park at a C-Train station or bus terminal.
- In contrast to the survey results, many Calgarians commenting through the online engagement and through social media were not supportive of the idea and indicated the implementation of fees could act as a deterrent to using transit and could have negative impacts on surrounding communities. Some also noted that this approach has been tried in the past without success.
- According to the survey, around one-half of Calgarians have used free parking at Calgary Transit facilities at least once, while far fewer have ever used reserved parking. Most indicated that they did not have difficulties finding free parking in the Calgary Transit lots.

Fire Service Response

- Survey research shows a strong majority of Calgarians are not willing to accept a 30 second slower response time from the Calgary Fire Department in order to save \$6.90 in their annual property taxes.
- Engagement findings also indicate strong opposition to this idea with many considering it to be irresponsible and unsafe. In addition to mentioning safety issues some commented about insurance premiums going up (and thus still costing them the same/more per household) and long-term impacts to people and communities. Some even talked about the importance of increasing the service to reduce current response times, and that they would be willing to pay more for that increase in service.
- In the social media commentary on the topic of Fire Response service, many citizens voiced concerns about increasing the fire response time and expressed their anger at the idea. Many citizens commenting in social media do not want to see cuts to Fire – a service they see as essential.