Distant, NOT Disengaged

This is a report for the Community Engagement Initiative from SFU Public Square, SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue and CityHive.

CityHive

SFU MORRIS J. WOSK CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

SFU PUBLIC SQUARE

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WHAT IS DISTANT, NOT DISENGAGED?

Distant, Not Disengaged was created as an experimental and innovative online event series to illuminate the urgent issues and opportunities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The series was a collaboration between SFU Public Square, the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue and community partner CityHive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everything—our institutions, our economy, our way of life. Our new reality presented us all with massive challenges and further threats to social cohesion. As in all crises, the cracks in our systems were laid bare—and in some ways, inequity had never been so clearly visible. These disruptions can either deepen these cracks or be catalysts for improving equity and empathy going forward. SFU Public Square, CityHive and SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue recognized this was a critical moment for us to come together to see and hear each other.

Distant, Not Disengaged gathered the public and a broadly defined understanding of "experts" to speak on a range of topics related to the pandemic and to explore key questions, like:

- How are we responding and what are we learning right now that can be used to strengthen the social infrastructure of our communities going forward?

- How can we reimagine our collective futures now that the fragile roots of "normalcy" have been exposed?

- What must we do to ensure we don't return to the status quo and instead create more just, sustainable and representative systems?

- What's possible when we're unencumbered by "that's just the way things are"?

This report by SFU Public Square, SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue and CityHive details the impact of CEI's generous funding for Distant, Not Disengaged.

» **SFU Public Square** is a signature community engagement initiative that works to support an informed, empowered and engaged public.

» **CityHive's** mission is to transform the way young people shape their cities and the civic processes that engage them.

» **The SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue** uses dialogue and engagement to facilitate transformative conversations and create real-world impact for society's most pressing challenges.
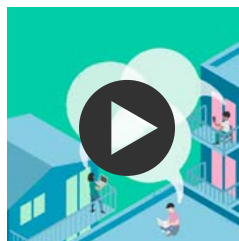
For a short video about *Distant, Not Disengaged*, go here.

MAIN OBJECTIVES, CORE ISSUES AND COMMUNITY INTERESTS

Our main objectives as a collaborative event team were informed by the impacts that COVID-19 was having on mental health and social cohesion. We sought to:

- Facilitate meaningful and thoughtful virtual dialogue

- Be experimental and lead by example to push the limits of engagement on Zoom

- Hold a brave space for conversations to be deep and vulnerable while operating from shared guidelines of anti-oppression

- Provide engaging learning opportunities and information on timely topics

- Introduce all attendees to new ideas, new organizations and new initiatives in the service of strengthening our communities

- Develop and foster community connection

- Disseminate clear facts and information and disrupt mis/disinformation

- Feature those directly impacted by inequities being deepened by the pandemic

- Encourage attendees to take action during times of crisis

Our team of collaborators each had a mandate to encourage connection within community, to help mobilize knowledge, to support social infrastructure, and to encourage democratic values and engagement. It made sense for us to work together to achieve our shared goals. But given our positions, networks, and resources, it made even more sense for us to widen the circle and create a platform for those who were already working on the ground to respond to emerging issues and address the holes in our social safety nets made larger by the pandemic. There were issues that needed to be talked about, there was work happening that deserved to be profiled, and there were people and organizations that would benefit from being able to be heard by – as well as hear from – our attendees, an audience that most likely would extend beyond their usual supporters and spheres of influence.

We recognized the importance of including those with lived experience of the social issues which, though urgent before the pandemic, were now even more so, and of hearing from others such as academics and practitioners who were striving to rapidly provide recommendations for policy- and decision-makers in real time.

Though all three planning teams contributed to different aspects of the logistics and operations required to produce the series each week, we arranged for each to take the planning lead on alternating weeks. The lead for that week would facilitate the relationships and partnerships and determine the focus. It was this collective yet defined effort that allowed us to undertake an intensive, responsive weekly schedule.

We looked at topics such as mutual aid, the impacts of COVID on the arts and culture sector, issues with elder care, anti-Asian racism, the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on mental wellness, race and representation in the media, who is included and who is left out of public engagement, the poisoned drug supply crisis, food justice, social cohesion and democratic engagement.

KEY PEOPLE, ORGANIZATIONS AND DEPARTMENTS

From CityHive

- **Veronika Bylicki,** Executive Director

- **Rowan Gentleman-Sylvester,** Civic Education Programs Coordinator

- **Michaela Slinger,** Community + Special Projects Coordinator

From SFU Public Square

- **Janet Webber,** Executive Director

- **Seth Erais,** Program Manager

- **Doug Hamilton-Evans,** Communications Manager

- **Geoff Smith,** Design Lead

- **Chloe Sjuberg,** Communications Coordinator

- **Kim Regala,** Communication & Marketing Assistant

- **Rachel Dee,** Program & Events Assistant

- **Sakshi Taneja,** Events & Marketing Assistant

- **Arnav Dada,** Events & Marketing Assistant

- **Cassandra Graves,** Design Assistant

## From SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

- **Jen Wolowic,** Project Manager, Strengthening Canadian Democracy

- **Sabrina Azaria,** Communications Associate

- **Zaria Alibhai,** Dialogue and Engagement Coordinator

- **Renée McMillen,** Communications Coordinator

- **Nicole Doucette,** Research Coordinator, Strengthening Canadian Democracy

- **Jocelyn Wong,** Communications Assistant

- **Maxine Yeo,** Research Assistant

- **Prodpran Wangcherdchuwong,** Dialogue and Engagement Analyst

- **Alice Frances,** Student and Faculty Engagement Manager

In addition to core staff, we also invited guidance and speakers from several SFU **faculties, departments and organizations** including:

- Sustainability Office

- Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS)

- Gerontology

- Health Sciences

- Urban Studies

- Indigenous Studies

- Political Science

- Student Engagement and Retention

- School of Resource and Environmental Management

- Centre for Restorative Justice

- Simon Fraser Student Society

- School of Communications

We featured over **150 guest speakers, moderators**, special guests and witnesses from a variety of organizations including:

- TransLink

- BC Federation of Students

- Vancouver Foundation

- Squamish Nation

- hua foundation

- Vancouver Indigenous Fashion Week

- West End Seniors' Network

- Nisga'a Ts'amiks

- Vancouver Economic Commission
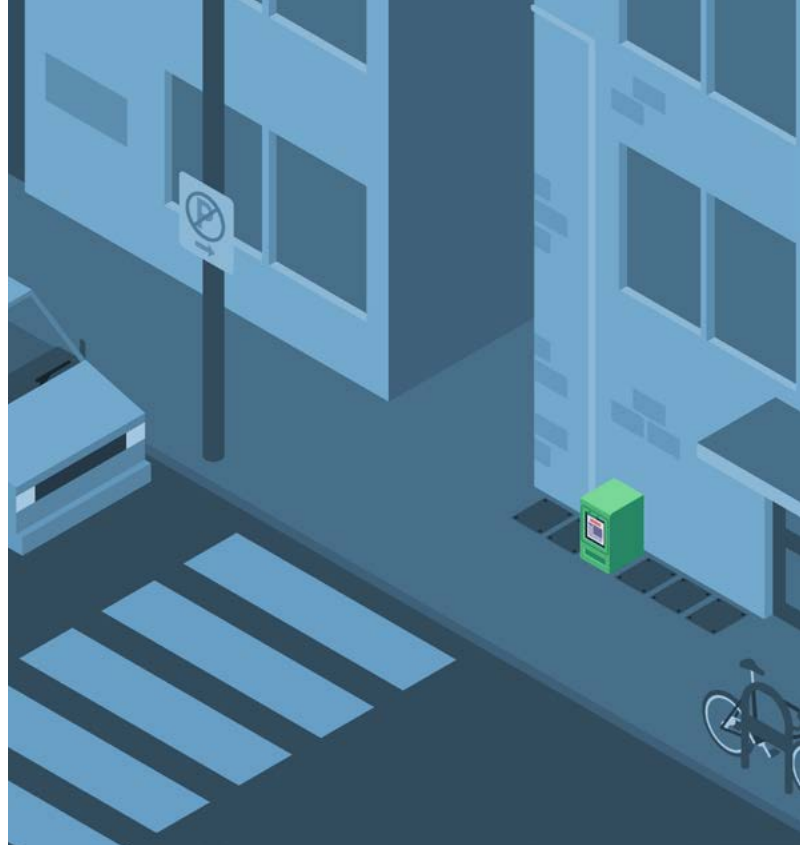
We also hosted many artists, actors, and organizers as well as elected representatives including municipal city councillors (including those from Vancouver, Langley, and New Westminster) and public servants such as Isobel Mackenzie, B.C.'s Seniors Advocate.

We also partnered with eight community leaders and organizations including:

- Mark Busse

- Global Shapers

- Canadian Association of Black Journalists (CABJ)

- Canadian Journalists of Colour (CJOC)

- WeInclude

- Another World Lab

- Cause+Affect

- Vancouver Foundation

IMPACT OF DISTANT, NOT DISENGAGED

Our collective successfully hosted 17 events over nine months in 2020 that welcomed over 2,500 participants from across Canada. Our internal team was very intentional about creating a virtual space that allowed for connection, reflection, tough questions and vulnerability, and we strove to centre a variety of voices and lived experiences. For example, in the same event, we had a gig economy worker share an impassioned, angry story about feeling used by the system, followed by an accomplished academic analyzing that system through a labour studies lens.

We agreed to a rigorous weekly event schedule to build an audience and provide a sense of regularity and routine for them. We always tried to replicate some of the opportunities for connection that come with an in-person community event to combat social isolation and promote community resilience. Smaller group discussions (breakout rooms) allowed community members to exchange stories and perspectives, build empathy and connection.

To overcome our physical distancing, we made time for breakout rooms at almost every event to bring people together for smaller group conversations on the topic at hand, or just see each other. We sought to update our format constantly and embraced an emergent, learning culture that applied the discoveries from the previous week into the design for the next. Elements such as the timing and length of breakout rooms, the order of guest speakers and the role of witnesses were shifted to prioritize participant engagement and opportunity for dialogue. And when our teams recognized that we needed more support in hosting conversations about race and oppression last summer, we brought in an outside consultant to build our collective anti-oppression facilitation skills. This workshop on facilitation allowed us to be more ready to intervene if comments or behaviour might contravene our community guidelines.

As the series evolved and we more deeply embraced an experimental, collaborative and reciprocal approach, the power distribution shifted, and the individuals and organizations we reached out to to work with us on particular topics were provided with more jurisdiction to shape and to lead. We sought funding (CEI) that allowed us to compensate our partners for their work, helping to build their capacity, and we, the presenting partners, began to move into a more supportive position. We provided the infrastructure, but got out of the way to let those that knew the problem best and were closest to it, design the agenda and propose other speakers they felt were best prepared to address the topic.

Accessibility and inclusion

To make these online spaces more inclusive, we worked to provide either closed captioning or ASL-EN interpretation – or both – at each event and also experimented with the inclusion of graphic facilitation to capture the content for sharing out afterwards. We were the first among our peers to foreground such accessibility measures in online events.

Whenever appropriate, we offered honorariums to speakers, Elders and Indigenous knowledge holders, facilitators, volunteers and witnesses to respect people's time and experience, and to more equitably compensate those whose participation in Distant, Not Disengaged would not be paid for under their salaried day job, particularly those facing financial hardship from the pandemic and those whose valuable lived experience is not generally compensated for. This allowed us to include more diversity in voices and perspectives in these conversations.

Recognizing that the digital space can make it easier for people to make hurtful comments and disruptions – especially in light of the topics we were taking on, we established community guidelines early on in the series and shared them on our webpages, on our registration pages, and at the beginning of each event. If we were going to be in this space together, we all had to respect a few basic principles of engaging:

1. All participants are asked to participate as socially accountable community members. We ask that you provide your full name as your display name during the online meeting and that you review our community guidelines ahead of your participation in the event. This is to ensure the safety of our guests and speakers as well as foster honest and accountable dialogue between people in this space. Thank you for respecting our community guidelines.

2. Above all, there will be zero tolerance for those who promote violence against others on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation, or different ability. Anyone who incites harm towards other participants (be it through the chat, video or audio functions) will be removed at the discretion of our technical team and moderator.

3. Be as present as possible (turn video on, put away phone, close/mute tabs).

4. Thoughtful questions are welcome in the chat throughout the session. If your question is for a particular speaker, type "@name" at the beginning.

5. Don't assume pronouns/gender/knowledge based on someone's name or video image. We can refer to people using the usernames they provide!

6. Step up, step back: if you've asked a question or shared a comment, ensure that new voices are heard before you contribute again.

7. Practice self-care: if you need to get up or take a break, please feel free.

Extending the conversation, sharing knowledge, encouraging action

As you can imagine, all of this required a lot of behind the scenes work, with more people involved in a digital event than a live one often. We encouraged an active chat, with moderators assigned to share information and links to supplement and encourage the discussion. We had people to send attendees to breakout rooms, to monitor the chat for community guidelines contravening, to provide tech support to attendees, to share screens, and advance slides and more. Getting proficient at this took time, reflection and experimentation. But it yielded a lot of valuable knowledge that we, as early adopters, were able to share within SFU and with community partners. Members of our team have given workshops and prepared guides and videos for others in the SFU community on how to do this.

We also worked to ensure that the events had an impact that extended beyond the day-of as we wanted events to ensure legacy outside of the moment in time we were all in conversation. To facilitate this we prioritized inviting special guests we called witnesses and circulated the ideas that came up in the event to attendees and key stakeholders after the fact.

In some Indigenous spaces, witnessing has an important role for validating and legitimizing important actions, discussions and events. As a witness, you take on a responsibility to observe and share stories of the event with those who were not there. We invited stakeholders on specific topics to attend as witnesses in listening mode. They were there to hear the conversation and share what they learned back in their everyday work. We customized the invited witnesses for each topic. For example, witnesses included local transit authority leadership, elected officials, community organizers, official advocates, and university leadership.

Many of the conversations acted as a space for guest speakers and the public to generate and share ideas. We compiled summaries of key takeaways as well as comments from the audience gathered from the chat or breakout rooms into resource documents that we circulated after the event. Sometimes they were in the form of graphic facilitation where an artist would visually summarize the themes they heard during an event. Other examples included a slide deck of suggestions students shared during an event about how to improve their COVID-19 learning experiences that we circulated to over a dozen different universities who sent someone as a witness. In other cases we circulated videos and blog recaps from the event directly to policy- and decision-makers.

As well, about a week after each event, videos, links, recaps and resources that were shared during the event and produced afterwards were also transposed into documents and sent to all attendees with the summary of key themes from the event.

These added steps strengthened university and community connections as we fulfilled our promise that presenters' and participants' voices would be amplified, as well as provided important feedback and insight to those engaged in these issues every day— so much so that months later, people are still reaching out to us to ask for a copy of the post-event documents or coming to us with ideas for future collaborations.

Media amplification

Distant, Not Disengaged conversations were also often picked up and amplified by journalists, searching for people to speak to the immediate and pressing concerns of our difficult times. Highlights include:

- Our live captioning, funded by the CEI grant from SFU, was featured in a CBC News article in December 2020

- Dr. Julia Smith, University Research Associate, Gender and COVID-19 Project, Faculty of Health Sciences and partner on "Mental Wellness & Covid 19: What's Gender Got To Do With It?" spoke with Adam Sterling on CFAX 1070 about the event in November 2020

- Before "Missed Connections: Social Cohesion and COVID-19" in August 2020 our speakers Carmel Tanaka, a community engagement specialist, and Vancouver Foundation director of partnerships Lidia Kemeny spoke with Michelle Eliot on CBC's The Early Edition about connecting during the pandemic

- In May 2020, Kathryn Marlow of CBC's All Points West spoke with two of our guests for "About that Career Plan…Millennials, Gen Zs and the Future of Work" – Shagufta Pasta, a Project Manager for SFU's Experiential Education program and Linxi Mytkolli, the Manager of Youthful Cities

Presenting at the 2021 University Social Responsibility Summit

The learnings from Distant, Not Disengaged have traveled beyond the boundaries of the university, Metro Vancouver, the province and the country. In February 2021, representatives of our team (virtually) attended the 2021 University Social Responsibility Summit 2021 in Pretoria, South Africa to give a presentation about Distant, Not Disengaged and community engagement in response to COVID-19 as part of a panel 'University Social Responsibility in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic.'

» Read the lecture abstract here

» And watch a video of the presentation here
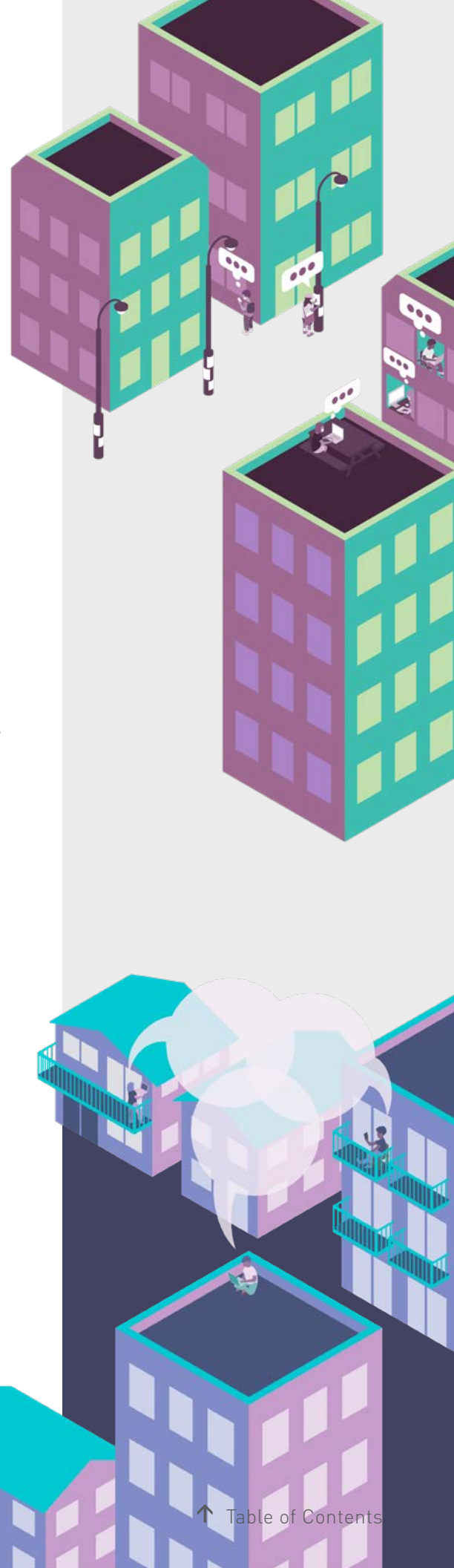
Conclusion

The result of this series was a more informed, connected and engaged community of people who believe in sharing ideas across differences and digging into some of our most complex and COVID-related 21st-century problems. Additionally, the entire collaborative Distant, Not Disengaged team built immense skill as virtual facilitators and public engagement professionals, and have taken that learning into the many other programs and initiatives they do within their own organizations.

We are grateful for the generous financial support of the Community Engagement Initiative that made Distant, Not Disengaged and its resultant impact and learnings possible. This funding was fundamental to the success of the series: it meant that we could walk the talk and make more inclusive, accessible and equitable spaces for crucial conversations about the challenges before us. We appreciate your commitment and support.

Testimonials

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Thank you to the amazing speakers, to Michaela & CityHive and to WeInclude for such a thoughtful, critical, engaging and frankly stunning session. I am so grateful I was able to see all of the presentations and hear the resounding stories.

— **Cait Murphy** *(WeInclude team) after COVID-19 and Anti-Asian Racism session*

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I'm so happy that I got to be a part of this incredible project and team. Please feel free to connect with me outside of work if you so choose, it's been a joy getting to know all of you.

— **Maxine Yeo,** *SFU Centre for Dialogue and Distant, Not Disengaged team member*

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Thanks for all of your great work. I learned a lot from the experiences shared. Even more valuable was the opportunity to discuss with small groups. I really missed that... Well done! I look forward to attending more in the future.

— *Tweet from Distant, Not Disengaged participant*

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Just wanted to send a big thank you to the CityHive and WeInclude team for the thoughtful conversation and great event – grateful to have been a part of it. I also heard really positive feedback from a few friends in the audience who remarked that it was the first time they've participated in a dialogue around anti-Asian racism and how it helped them unpack some of their own feelings around it and inspired conversation with their own friends, thank you for organizing and giving space to these issues!

— **Tim Lam,** *Cold Tea Collective*

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Friends. Let me say that I am so proud of you. I have had the privilege of watching you pivot, hold difficult conversations, look inward and ask hard questions together as a team. I am so happy to watch your journey.

— **Alice Frances,** *SFU*

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SUPPORTING MEDIA

- Distant, Not Disengaged recap video

- SFU Public Square's webpage
  for Distant, Not Disengaged
  Go here to access key takeaway resources, blog posts,
  video recordings and graphic facilitation images

- SFU Centre for Dialogue's webpage
  for Distant, Not Disengaged

- CityHive's webpage for Distant, Not Disengaged

- CityHive year-in-review post about
  Distant, Not Disengaged

- Guest blog post and video from Mental Wellness
  & COVID-19: What's Gender Got to Do With It?

- Video from Whose Voice? Reimagining
  Public Engagement

- Video and resources from COVID-
  19 and the Future of Democracy

- Guest blog post and video from Missed
  Connections: Social Cohesion and COVID-19

- Key takeaways, slide deck and resources from Advice
  From Students: Post-Secondary in the Age of COVID-19

- Blog post and video for A Tale of Two Crises:
  COVID-19 and the Overdose Emergency

- Video of Navigating Race-Based Data -
  Intersections of Health Through COVID-19

- Blog post and videos from Breaking News:
  Canadian Media Fails to Represent

- Graphic facilitation recap of our The Arts Matter!

- Video clip of JUNO Award winner Dan Mangan
  performing at our The Arts Matter!

- Calls to action from Disrupted: How COVID-
  19 Will Shape Climate Action

- Participants' questions from Where Did All the
  Buses Go? An Ask Me Anything on Transit

- Blog post on Leading Locally: Grassroots
  Responses to COVID-19

- Slides and key takeaways from The Age of
  Worry: Youth-Specific Impacts of COVID-19

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Expense	Actual amounts
Speakers	$5525.00
Storytellers	$350.00
Partnerships and community collaborations	$1500.00
Staff anti-oppression and facilitation training	$6000.00
Accessibility considerations (cc, asl)	$1897.50
Graphic facilitation	$1610.00
Cityhive contract	$3937.50
TOTAL	**$20,820.00**

Revenue	
CEI funding	$7500.00
Cityhive	$1000.00
SFU Public Square	$6,131.40
Centre for Dialogue	$6,188.60

*Costs do not include staff support and administrative
 overhead for the three organizations.