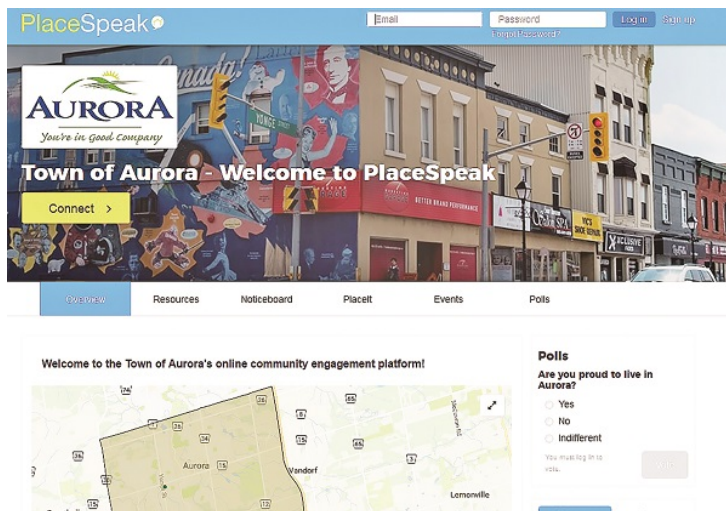


## Aurora ?Speaks? through new online engagement program



**By Brock Weir**

In the online world, it can be difficult for your voice to be heard ? but municipal staff are ready to hear you loud and clear through the launch of Place Speak.

The Town of Aurora welcomes the public to head over to its website to become familiar with Place Speak, a new online mechanism for community engagement. With a soft launch held on Monday, the program will be fully up and running by September allowing Aurora residents to use the tool to point out their traffic safety issues and concerns.

Until that time, staff are working out any early bugs asking residents to engage with them ? and each other ? of their favourite places in and around Town.

?This is really allowing us to put power in the residents' hands to really help us understand their needs and wants so we can make informed recommendations to Council, but it is a citizen-centric approach to improving the consultation process and improving access to feedback,? says Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith, Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town of Aurora.

Billed as a free and easy way for members to communicate, they can also control what information they want to receive from the Town and the notifications they receive.

?We know there are a number of barriers to participation in local government and convenience is one of them. A lot of surveys have also said that a few strong voices always dominate so they have concerns that their contributions might not make a difference,? she says. ?We also know that a lot of people who participate in local government do so by completing online surveys or through social media and other online platforms, so this kind of allows us to provide feedback and engage in two-way conversations with people and provide content on decision-making processes and outcomes that may not be available to other people.?

The Town concedes it is hard to get people to come join committees or come out to Council meetings and make a long-term commitment to coming out a couple of evenings every month to make their contributions. Place Speak is intended to not only break down those barriers to increase public participation but also allow staff to become more engaged with residents who have concerns. Once users are familiar with the new system, Traffic Safety will be the first issue residents will be asked to tackle. Once that is in place, users will be able to drop pins on the map and describe their traffic issues, upload photos, participate in polls, and be a part of identifying the solution.

?We have heard from the community that there's a lot of concerns about traffic and safety is, of course, the number one priority,? says Ms. Mackenzie-Smith. ?We want to make sure people are engaging and we're able to have that two-way conversation. It is about working together to come up with solutions. We need to have this open line of communication so that people can ask us questions and we can also provide context and answers they might not be able to get by sitting in a Council meeting or attending an open house.?

Traffic and traffic safety are just the first frontier Place Speak might tackle during this one-year pilot project. There is no limit to the number of municipal issues which can be addressed through the online forum and Ms. Mackenzie-Smith says the recent Highland

Gate redevelopment plan and the Aurora United Church's building application are just two examples of community issues which could have benefited from this type of engagement.

To sign up and get familiar with Place Speak, visit [www.aurora.ca](http://www.aurora.ca) and select the blue and white Place Speak tab on the right hand side of the webpage, or head over directly to [www.placespeak.com/aurora](http://www.placespeak.com/aurora).