

# What we Heard

## BlindSquare Event at the Downtown Pedestrian Mall

### **Disclaimer**

This document provides a summary of what was heard from participants during this engagement process. It is not meant to reflect the specific details of each submission word-for-word, although attempts have been made to do so when possible.

The City produces a What We Heard document for every city-led public engagement project. This collected commentary is shared with the community to ensure we heard you correctly.

The City protects the privacy of those who provide feedback as per Access to Information and Privacy Legislation.

The full scope of commentary is used by city staff and Council to help inform recommendations and decisions.

### **Background**

- Feedback on the Downtown Pedestrian Mall in 2020 noted there were accessibility concerns for persons with disabilities and that BlindSquare, a voice activated wayfinding system, might be a tool the City could use to improve accessibility for those who are blind or have low vision.
- In 2021, Staff worked with BlindSquare, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), and City internal stakeholders to determine how the technology could be programmed and used for the Downtown Pedestrian Mall.
- In 2022 the app was launched as a pilot project at the start of the Pedestrian Mall.
- The app currently works for iOS operating devices; the developer of BlindSquare is working on an android version for 2023.

- Some people with visual impairments were critical of the app after the launch due to its limited availability for devices other than iOS.
- CNIB offered training/information sessions for those interested in learning more about the app.

### **Purpose of Engagement**

The purpose of the public engagement was to provide user experience feedback and staff perspective which will inform the project team's assessment of whether the pilot project met its objectives. As well, it will help determine whether to continue to use the app, enhance usage, or discontinue the app.

### **Engagement and Communications**

- Public Service Announcement issued on Sept.19, 2022
- Project page on EngageStJohns.ca published on Sept. 19, 2022
- Newsletter to 3697 registered users and followers of EngageStJohns.ca
- Posts to regular City communications channels including social media, listservs, website
- Email to CNIB and other service providers to share with their distribution lists
- Inclusion Advisory Committee asked to share with their distribution lists

### **Who Engaged**

#### **On EngageStJohns.ca**

- Total Visits:74

### **Survey Responses**

- 26 responses

### **Meeting with Organizational Stakeholders:**

- CNIB
- Frontier (BlindSquare App)

### **Email:**

- 3 submissions

### **Meeting with Staff**

- Risk Management
- Communications
- Regulatory Services
- Land Information Services
- Events and Services
- Inclusion Services

### **What We Heard Highlights**

- There is a view that offering accessibility improvements through BlindSquare is a good thing for the City to do.
- Those who used the app found it easy and helpful; those who attended the information sessions with the CNIB found them helpful as well.
- Concerns were expressed around the limited availability (iOS only at this time) making the app accessible only to those with

an iPhone/iPad/iPod.

- Concerns were expressed around the promotion and awareness of the app as a tool for navigation for only users with vision loss or blindness however the app can be used by others as well.
- There is generally agreement that the City should explore the use of the app for other events and services/locations.
- There was a lot of learning in 2022 which can streamline and improve the use of the app going forward.

## **What We Heard Details – Survey**

26 people responded to the survey

- 7 people were blind or had low vision – 3 of them used the app
  - Of those who used the app, all said it was easy to use, it helped them locate amenities and they attended the information session which was helpful
  - One area for improvement was noted: Tell the user when they are on the road versus sidewalk
  - Those who did not use the app said they either did not have an iPhone or simply did not know how to use it
  - Majority said the city should explore other locations to use the app such as at events like the Festival of Music and Lights, City parks, Metrobus, other recreation facilities
  - What we heard from users:
    - “It was an amazing feeling to be able to identify the things around me.”
    - “Where it exists, I will use it! It gives

independence, accessibility and safety.”

- “I think having Blind Square available at more locations will increase independence for people who are blind/partially sighted.”

### **What We Heard Details - Survey**

- 3 people who completed the survey had other disabilities but were not blind and did not have low vision
  - While this group was aware of the app, none of them used it
  - They did not use the app because they did not have an iPhone or did not know how to use the app
  - One person felt the City should use the app in other locations; one person was undecided
  - Biggest concern was that the app was only using iOS and limiting access as a result
- 16 respondents fell into “other” category – only three of these used the app or knew someone who used it
  - Of those who used it, they found it to be easy to use
  - Those who attended the information session found it helpful
  - There was a concern about the app only being available on iPhone
  - More people need to know about the app
- Majority of all respondents said the City should explore using BlindSquare in other locations including City events, parades, parks, Mary Brown’s Centre, City sidewalks, shopping centres, and hospitals.

### **What We Heard Details - Survey**

When asked what else the Pedestrian Mall could do to improve accessibility, feedback included:

- Install pedestrian/bicycle elevators on the streets above

and below Water St.

- Continue to allow bicycles on the street as some people use them for mobility
- Add bicycle ramps to the stairs on Prescott St. or replace them with a separate lane for easier access
- Accessible washrooms are a must
- Have an information kiosk
- Provide a map of all businesses within the mall footprint
- Explore a shuttle service from a larger parking area
- Ensure ramps into buildings are truly accessible and not creating tripping hazards

### **What We Heard - Email**

- Two very positive emails outlining how people felt using the app at the pedestrian mall
- One very negative email regarding the lack of consultation with people in the community during the development phase and concerns with the IOS only option

### **What We Heard - Stakeholder Groups**

- 2022 was a trial year, the team learned a lot about the app
- Team members received feedback from users that was positive about their experience
- There were some glitches as the team navigated the inputs for data but CNIB did most of the tagging which was very helpful
- “Look around” feature was good as people could "look around" and plan their outing before coming to the site

- Pedestrian Mall infrastructure changes as parklets are built/removed, people move tables/chairs, etc., which posed challenges to ensure all tags were current

### **What We Heard - Stakeholder Groups**

- CNIB needs to get more people familiar with the app to improve uptake
- An android version is a must going forward
- CNIB can do a walkthrough of the area to plan for next year
- Promotional video was not usable – need content earlier that can be shared with other potential users, i.e. cruise ships/tourism, etc..
- Battery life of phone depleted by use in app
- Need a simple tip sheet for users – quick facts
- All agreed it would be worthwhile to continue with the app and expand use
- Some interest in using it for temporary events as well
- There is interest in connecting with other groups to discuss how the app can be used in tandem with other technology to improve accessibility overall

### **What We Heard - City Staff**

- Communications would like more time to prepare for roll out and ongoing promotion
- City insurance process worked well
- Land Information Services can be more involved with the data entry/tagging process

- Challenges with keeping the physical site barrier-free, i.e., moving tables and chairs, etc.
- Opportunity to improve information sharing between Inspection Services and Inclusion team as new parklets are added
- There were staff changes before and during app roll out which impacted the project
- There is no data available from the app provider on the number of downloads and usage in a given geographic location. This impacted the evaluation process.
- Need to let people know to download the app in advance – save data usage
- Name of the app may not fully capture what it can do as a wayfinding tool

## **Next Steps**

### **To stay informed**

Follow the project page or sign up to receive notifications at [EngageStJohns.ca](https://engagestjohns.ca).