

# Youth Vision of Simcoe County: Report

**October 2021**

**SCEYA**



Simcoe County Greenbelt Coalition

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# Youth Vision of Simcoe County Survey

## Introduction

The Youth Vision of Simcoe County Survey was a collaboration between Simcoe County Greenbelt Coalition (SCGC) and Simcoe County Environmental Youth Alliance (SCEYA) over the summer and fall of 2021. The intention of the survey was to get an indication of where Simcoe County youth are at with regards to climate action, barriers to engaging in their communities and their visions for the future of their communities. While including many different aspects of community, the primary focus of the survey was climate and environment, because this is the primary focus of the organizations that conducted the survey.

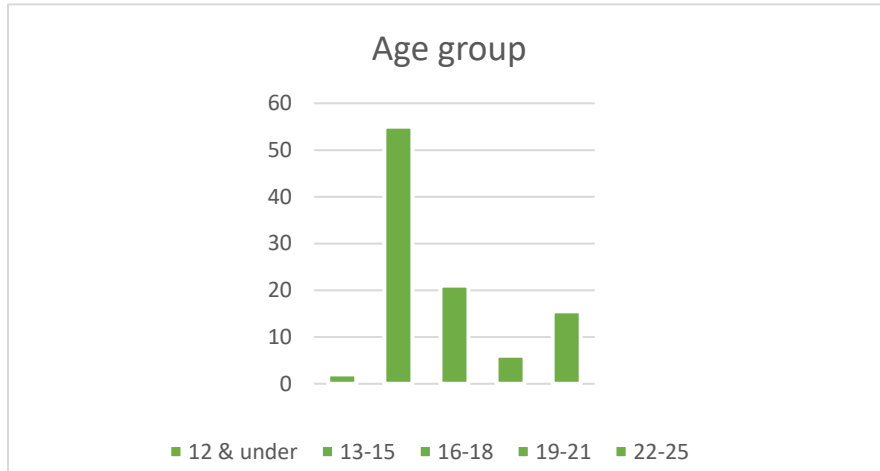
This was an informal community survey to help inform how local organizations can help eliminate barriers that youth are facing to engaging in community organizations, local government and climate action more generally. The results of this survey are not generalizable, nor is this intended to be a formal, academic study. The survey was promoted through social media, word of mouth ('snowball sampling') and reaching out to community organizations, local libraries and schools. The survey had 162 respondents. No contact information was collected from participants to ensure the anonymity of the youth who completed the survey.

This survey is the first part of efforts to create more spaces for youth voices and youth leadership in local advocacy and climate action here in Simcoe County. Youth are disproportionately impacted by climate change, as they will be living with the consequences of past and *current* inactions; marginalized youth, particularly BIPOC youth, will be impacted even more so. Climate policy and community initiatives, as well as those connected to climate such as housing, social justice, jobs and economy, transportation, food security, water security, Indigenous rights, education, public and mental health, etc, must be informed by diverse youth voices, as decisions made today will impact the future that these youth will inherit. This is true on the global scale as much as on the local scale.

## Demographics

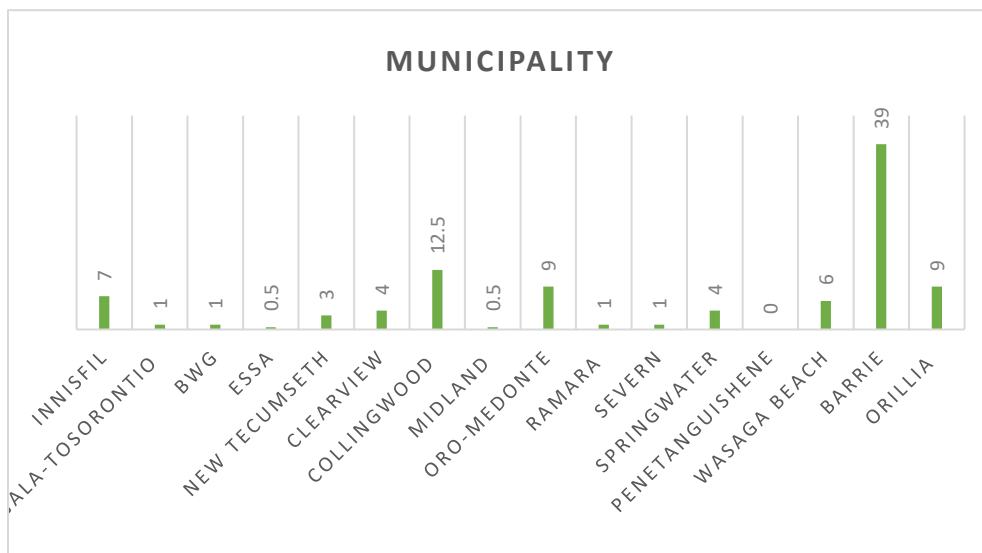
This section will briefly outline some basic demographic information of participants. Note that a large portion of responses were collected from elementary school students in the City of Barrie at a particular school due to snowball sampling, so the responses will skew towards representing these youth.

Just over half of our respondents were in the 13-15 age category, followed by the 16-18 category and the 22-25 year olds (Fig. 1). We grouped all ages of 12 and under together, because we knew that an online survey (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) was less likely to reach younger youth and children and there was no capacity to facilitate the informed completion of the survey by children.



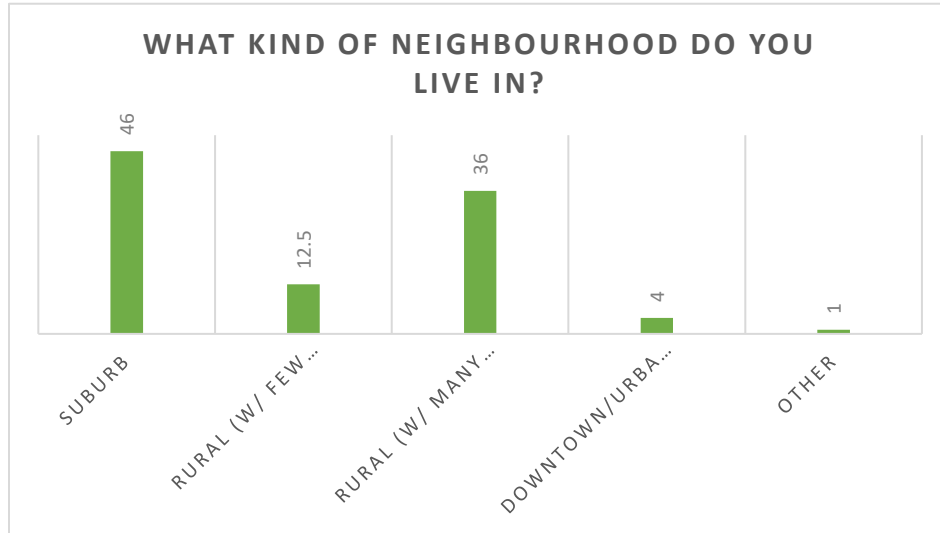
(Fig. 1)

Most respondents lived in Barrie, followed by Collingwood, Orillia and Oro-Medonte (Fig. 2). Note that responses were rounded to the nearest 0.5, so there may be variation by half of a percentage in some responses.



(Fig. 2)

Nearly half of respondents lived in what they identified as a suburb, while just over a third said that they lived in a rural neighbourhood with many neighbours (Fig. 3). This reflects Simcoe County as a whole, with about two thirds of the County’s housing consisting of single-detached units (Chapman, 2021). Other was identified as a ‘condo’.

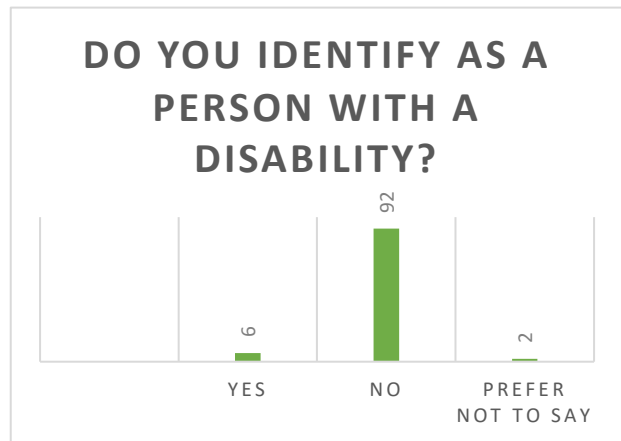


(Fig. 3)

Below is some other basic demographic information regarding identity to get an understanding of which youth participated in the survey:



(Fig. 4)



(Fig. 5)

**Racial identity/identities:**

This was an open question for respondents to identify as they preferred, including being able to include multiple responses to better reflect their background(s). The percentages therefore reflect distribution of identities rather than number of respondents, because some youth included multiple answers. 80% (130) of respondents answered this question. Of this, 3% identified as Indigenous (First Nations or Metis); 79% identified as white; 8% identified as Asian; 3% identified as Middle Eastern; 2% identified as Black;



2% identified as Indian. Responses of less than 1% were grouped together as 'Other' with a total of 4.5% consisting of these smaller categories.

### Gender identity/identities:

This was an open question for respondents to identify as they preferred. 88% (143) respondents answered this question: 46% identified with a feminine identity (Female, Woman, Girl); 33.5% of respondents identified with a masculine identity (Male, Man, Boy); 3% identified as Non-Binary and 0.5% identified as Genderfluid.

### Language(s):

This was an open question for respondents to identify as they preferred, including being able to include multiple responses to better reflect their background(s). 91% of respondents answered this question: 99% listed 'English'; 1% also included Arabic; 2% included Chinese/Mandarin; 20% included French; 2% German; 2% Russian; 3% Spanish. Languages with only 1 response are not included here for brevity.

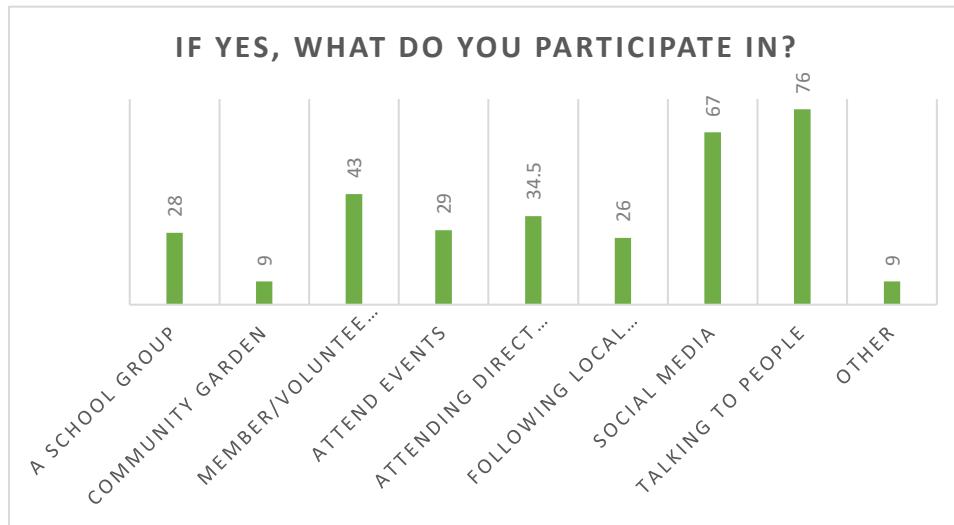
## Participation

Almost two thirds of respondents said that they were not involved in climate activism (this shows that we reached youth outside of SCGC's regular audience) (Fig. 6).



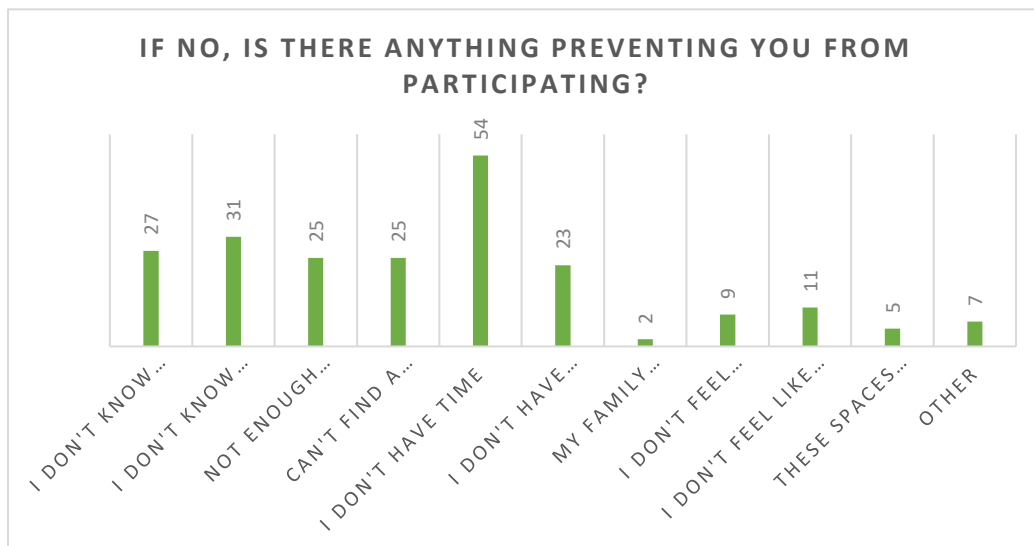
(Fig. 6)

We asked what kind of climate activism these youth participated in, for those who indicated ‘Yes’ (Fig. 7). This was a ‘check all that apply’ question. Those who said they participate in climate activism mostly took part in talking to people (such as family and friends) about climate/environmental issues and through social media. This was followed by attending direct actions and events and participating in some form of school group or club. ‘Other’ responses included: signing surveys, using a school’s speech competition to raise awareness, and reducing meat consumption.



(Fig. 7)

For those that did not participate in climate activism, we asked if there were any barriers to participation that they were facing. This was a ‘check all that apply’ question (Fig. 8). A lack of time to engage was identified as the largest barrier to participating in climate activism.



(Fig. 8)

This is what we could expect, as we would expect that young people are busy with education, extracurriculars, and living through a pandemic in this case.

Finding roles or options for youth that are not as demanding on their time as they may perceive advocacy work to be may help address this barrier. This would suggest that there is a perception that to be an activist, one needs to dedicate a large amount of time and energy to a cause; many do, but there are other ways to do activist/advocacy work too. Getting options out there that show youth that their interests, skills and hobbies can be harnessed towards the climate movement may encourage them to direct work they are already doing into climate activism without the additional time commitments. Similarly, schools, classroom teachers, and community organizations should take on climate action projects with their youth and direct existing learning towards climate, as this impacts every area of study or interest and can be easily incorporated. For example, youth are already spending so much time in school, so this time could be used to work towards learning and projects that they want to do. Additionally, creating more paid positions for youth, both in non-profits and with the local government, can help close this gap so that youth are compensated for their time.

Other barriers identified included youth not feeling like they know enough about climate change or about local issues and initiatives. This may fit another possible perception of activists, in that one needs to be an ‘expert’ of sorts to participate – even to simply speak to one’s local Council, for example. Addressing this perception and affirming that everyone who cares about climate justice and its many intersections can participate and that there are many different roles to play in the climate movement. Making it clear that everyone has something to offer, regardless of knowledge, ability, skills, qualifications, as well as clearly communicating local issues and how they connect to climate change can help address this barrier. This is an essential part of any climate communication strategies – this is an ‘all hands on deck’ situation.

Finally, the other main barrier identified was not being able to find a group or organization in their community, or not finding enough roles for youth within those organizations. This confirms what we already know: while youth are leading the broader movement for climate action, we – adults and institutions - need to do better at centering youth voices in *local* advocacy as well (Chan et al., 2021). There are fewer youth-led or youth-oriented organizations in the County than general, adult-led organizations, especially environmental or climate groups.

Many local organizations or groups working on local issues tend to be established networks of adults who have established relationships to one another and to local politics. While this can certainly be a strength, it can also be exclusionary and inaccessible for young people looking to break into this, both due to inexperience and age differences. Youth do not see themselves in these groups, which are entrenched in the history of an issue, potentially with negative relationships with local politics, and may simply seem jaded, which does not convey a hopeful or healthy activist environment to join. Efforts to increase opportunities for intergenerational collaboration should be



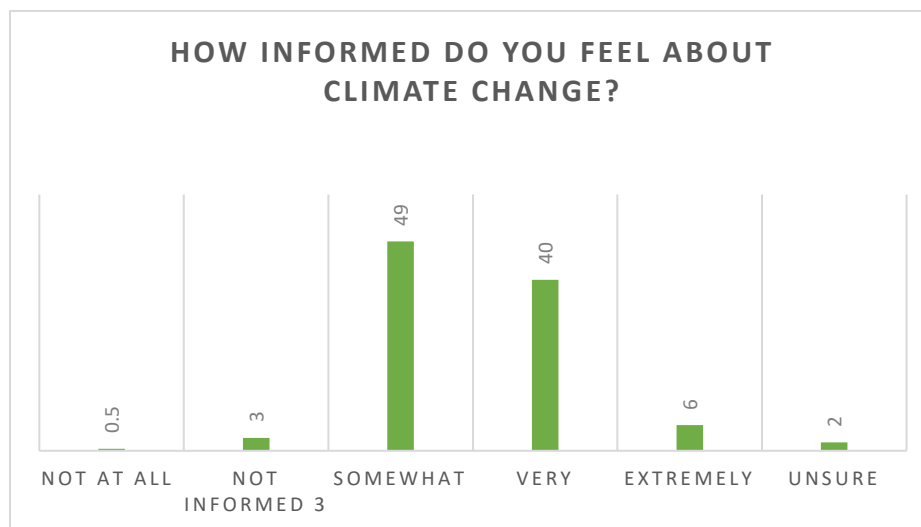
prioritized within existing organizations to make it clear that youth are welcome in these spaces.

Some 'Other' responses included: Lack of interest, other priorities, disenchantment with politics and "members of these groups all seem to be more bitter than they are helpful". Connecting local issues to the broader climate movement and narrative, which is largely youth-led, and being more open and engaging in hopeful narratives (for example, see Kelsey 2016) could help in addressing this barrier, as well as purposefully making more roles for youth, including *paid* positions.

These findings align with Canada's *State of Youth Report* (Government of Canada, 2021), which provides further recommendations for Canadian organizations and governments, and are largely consistent with findings from the Global Center on Adaptation's report on young people and climate adaptation (Chan et al., 2021), with further insights.

### Concerns & Barriers

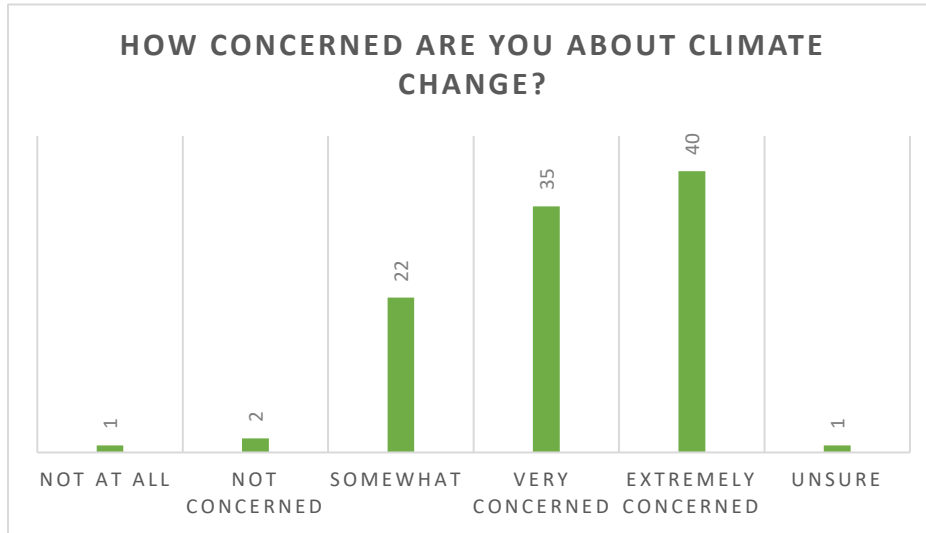
Participants felt either somewhat or very informed about climate change. While more in-depth research about the how youth *perceive* how informed they are would be beneficial, considering the above response indicating that some youth did not feel like they knew enough to participate meaningfully, we could potentially infer that these youth were either confident in their understanding of climate change, felt that they should know more but do not have the time or resources, or are not interested in learning more.



(Fig. 9)

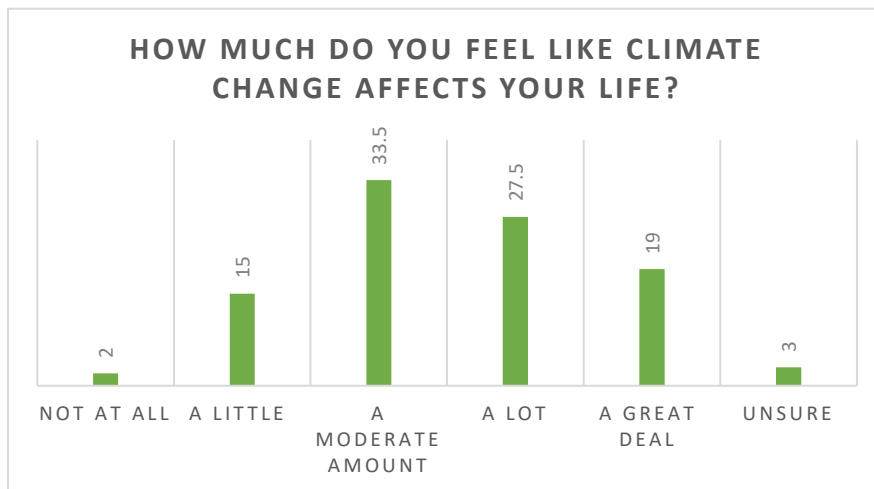
In line with broader research, most youth felt very or extremely concerned about climate change. We know that young people globally are facing severe mental health challenges because of the climate emergency, and according to more recent research (Marks et al., 2021), these mental health challenges have been specifically linked to government inaction. This implicates all levels of government with a responsibility for minors' wellbeing via the strength of their climate policies. Climate action therefore must

be part of addressing the mental health crisis that is impacting youth here in Simcoe County, especially as conditions are projected to worsen in the coming decades (Warren & Lulham, 2021).



(Fig. 10)

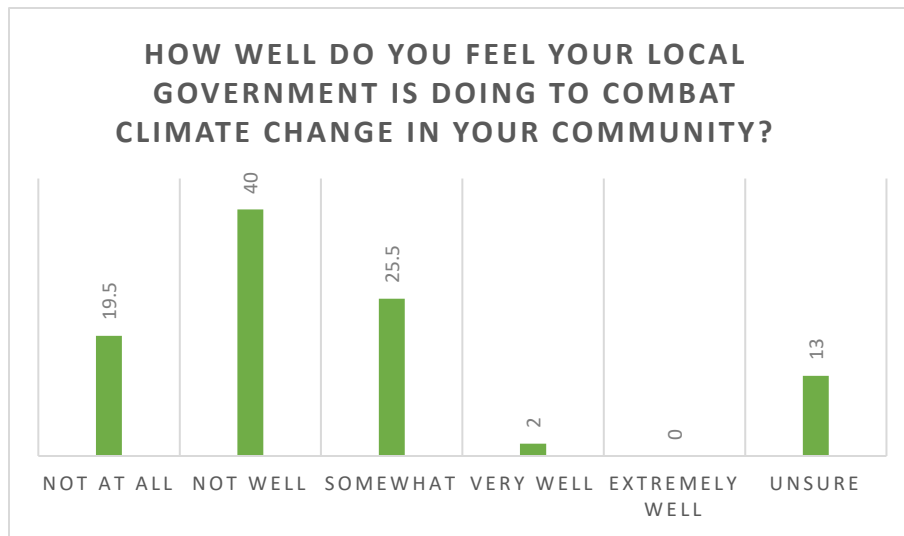
About a third of participants felt that climate change is affecting their lives moderately, but nearly half felt that it is affecting their lives either a lot or a great deal (Fig. 11). This is in line with broader research (e.g. Marks et al., 2021). Considering that the worst climate impacts are still yet to come in Ontario (Warren et al., 2021), this is particularly concerning. Young people are recognizing that *the Climate Emergency is here, now*. Looking into how climate change is affecting their lives was outside the scope of this particular survey, but we can infer from other research that mental health impacts and the uncertainty about their futures are likely among the main impacts being felt by local youth.



(Fig. 11)

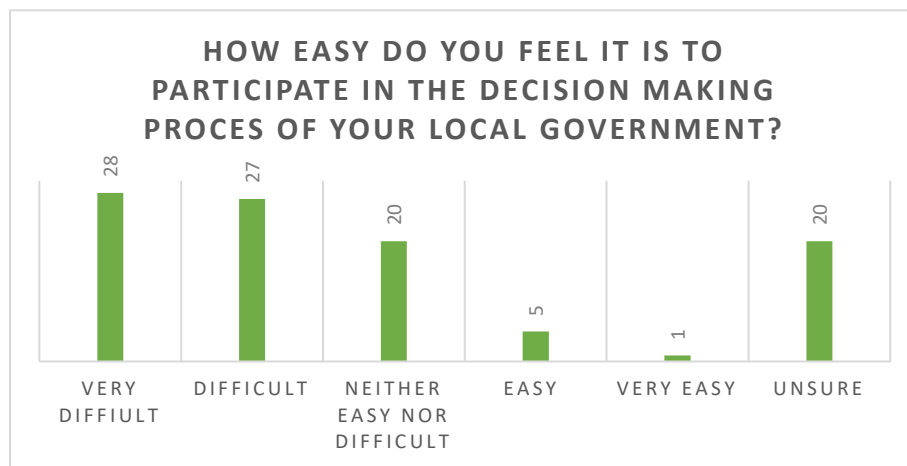
Respondents were not impressed with how they felt their municipalities are doing in combating climate change. A large majority of participants felt that their local governments were doing somewhat well, not well, or not at all well. None felt that their local governments were doing extremely well (Fig. 12). This is likely due to municipalities across Simcoe County (including the County itself) not yet having many concrete or tangible reactions to the Climate Emergency, despite some of them declaring Climate Emergencies.

While this is an indictment of municipal climate policies, it also shows a clear opportunity, especially for local governments wishing to engage youth (or gain political support from youth) in addition to their obligations to mitigate and adapt to climate change. This should be seen as an opportunity for local governments to step up, meaningfully engage young people and do their part to take real climate action. With municipalities currently in the midst of Municipal Comprehensive Reviews (MCRs) at the time of writing, they can take advantage of this chance to include real progress on these issues in their new Official Plans, especially considering that the MCR timeline extends to 2051, encompassing both our 2030 and 2050 global climate targets.



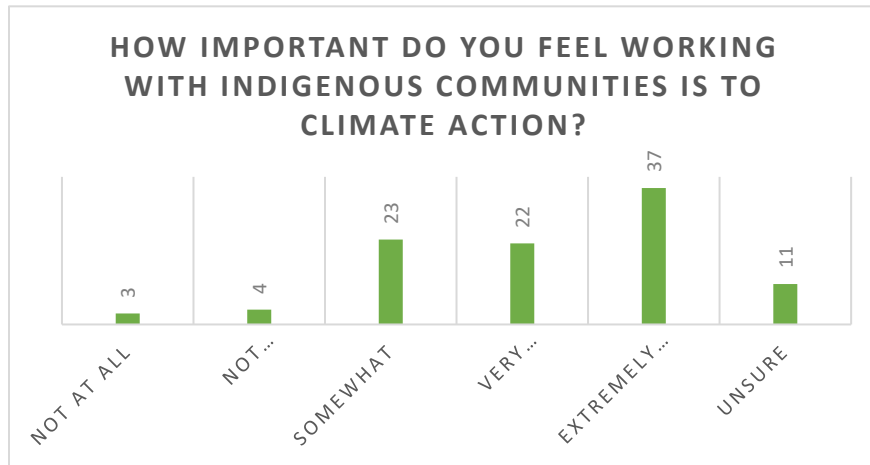
(Fig. 12)

Municipalities make their efforts to inform or include the public in decision making, as per public consultation policies. However, at least for these young people, these efforts are falling short. About half of participants felt that participating in local decision making was difficult or very difficult. The other half felt that it was neither easy nor difficult or they were unsure (Fig. 13). Young people are clearly being excluded by their municipalities, whether through design or as an unintended by-product of the current public consultation processes. This reflects barriers that youth across Canada are facing (Government of Canada, 2021) and internationally (Chan et al., 2021), particularly in policymaking. Considering that planning decisions inherently plan for the future, especially the MCR with its 2051 timeline, young people must be meaningfully involved, as these are *their* communities that are being planned, largely without them it would seem.



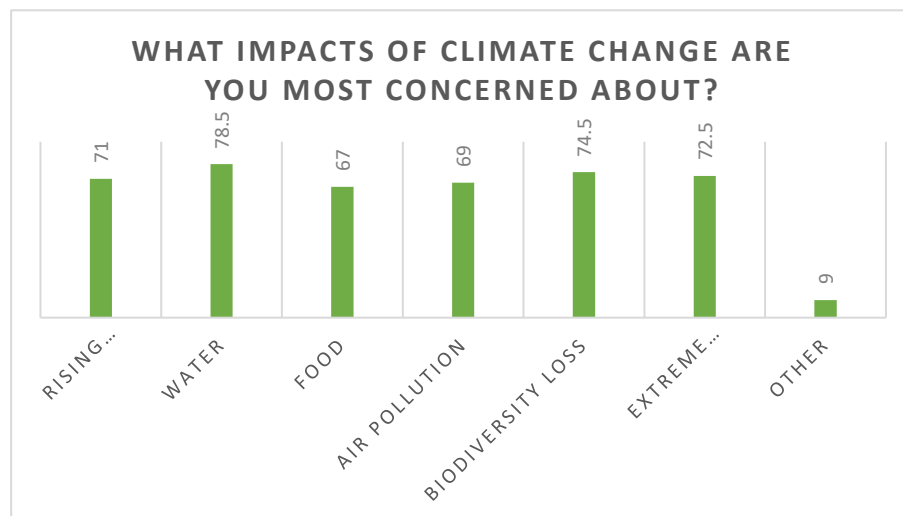
(Fig. 13)

Many respondents felt that working with Indigenous communities on climate action was extremely important, followed by somewhat and very important (Fig. 14). This is clearly an increasing priority among Canadians, especially after marking the first National Day of Truth and Reconciliation (NDTR) in 2021 (note: these survey results came in before the NDTR, so this sentiment could potentially be higher now). This youth support for Reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignty is also reflected nationally (Government of Canada, 2021). More broadly, we know that land-use planning and conservation must be enacted in partnership with, if not led by, Indigenous communities and their Traditional Knowledge Systems (e.g., see the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' *First Nation-Municipal Land Use Planning Tool*).



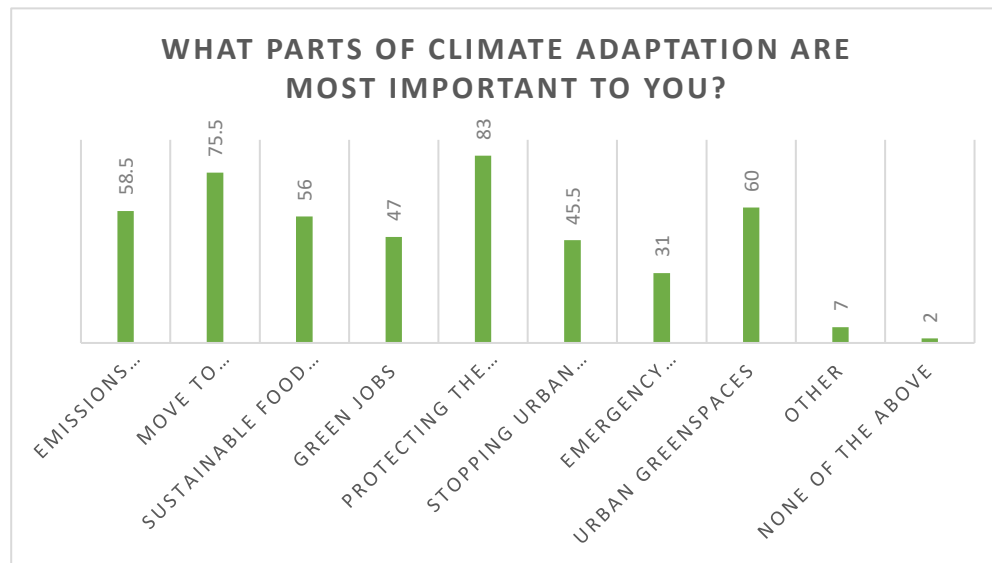
(Fig. 14)

When asked which impacts of climate change they are most concerned about, a large majority of the youth were concerned about all of the impacts listed: rising temperatures, water security, food security, air pollution, biodiversity and habitat loss, and extreme weather events (Fig. 15). Water came out slightly ahead as the most concerning impact of climate change. This was a ‘check all that apply’ question, so these answers are not divided among participants, but compounded between them. ‘Other’ written-in responses included: job and economic security, rising sea levels, disproportionate impact on marginalized/frontline communities, and health impacts. We appreciate that each of these impacts have several implications and nuances, but for the scope of this survey, we kept these broad for the sake of accessibility.



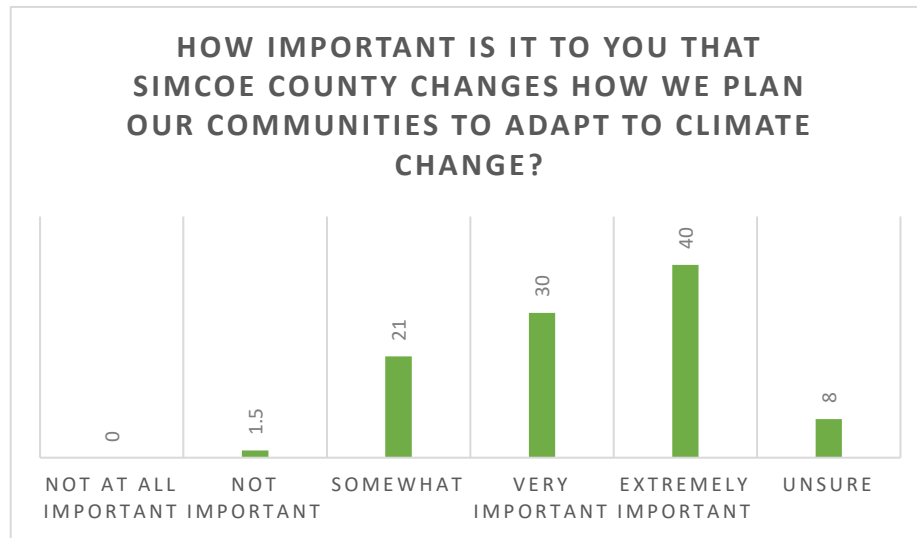
(Fig. 15)

We asked about which climate adaptation/mitigation strategies were most important to youth. We asked participants to ‘check all that apply’ here. We see that protecting the environment and moving to renewable energy rank as the highest priorities for these youth (Fig. 16). These were closely followed by emissions reduction, revitalizing more urban greenspaces and moving to sustainable food production. We also saw high prioritization of more green jobs and stopping urban sprawl, as well as emergency preparednes.



(Fig. 16)

Nearly all participants agreed that Simcoe County needs to change the way we plan in order to adapt to climate change, with 40% saying that this was extremely important to them (Fig. 17). Young people want their local governments to be making planning and policy decisions in line with the science; this is not at all surprising given the several, global climate strikes, largely youth-led, we have seen in recent years demanding exactly this.



(Fig. 17)

This is not unique to youth perspectives, as the need for municipalities to be taking on serious climate action is well documented, including in IPCC reports (Revi et al., 2014). The planning literature outlines several common strategies that municipalities should be taking on board, although there are place and context-specific nuances that vary region to region. In Ontario, transportation and buildings make up the majority of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, which is consistent across Simcoe County (Hemson & LTD, 2021; City of Barrie, n.d.). This indicates that lowering emissions through efficiency of infrastructure, energy and land-use (i.e. higher intensification and densification targets to build higher density mixed homes and businesses as well as dramatically increasing the modal share of active and public transportation) should be priorities for all municipalities, as denser, urban living produces far less emissions than suburban or rural residents (Trubka et al., 2010; Environmental Defence, 2013; OECD, 2018; Environmental Defence, 2019; Zwick, 2021; Singh & Milman, 2021). This is affirmed through the policy framework of the Growth Plan (Government of Ontario, 2020).

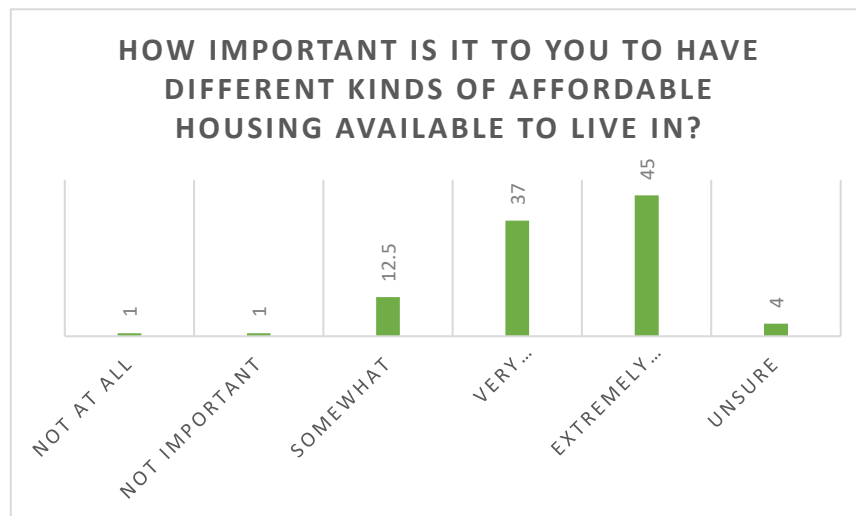
This survey confirms that local youth are feeling the urgency around the Climate Emergency, that we need to be doing everything we can to meet the required climate targets, and that local governments have a responsibility to act boldly, and act now.

## Vision for the future of communities

We asked participants to rank how important different aspects of community were to them. These were aspects of community design that are associated with Complete Communities, as per Ontario's Growth Plan (Government of Ontario, 2020) for municipalities to follow in their Official Plans, which are currently under review at the time of writing.

## Community Priorities

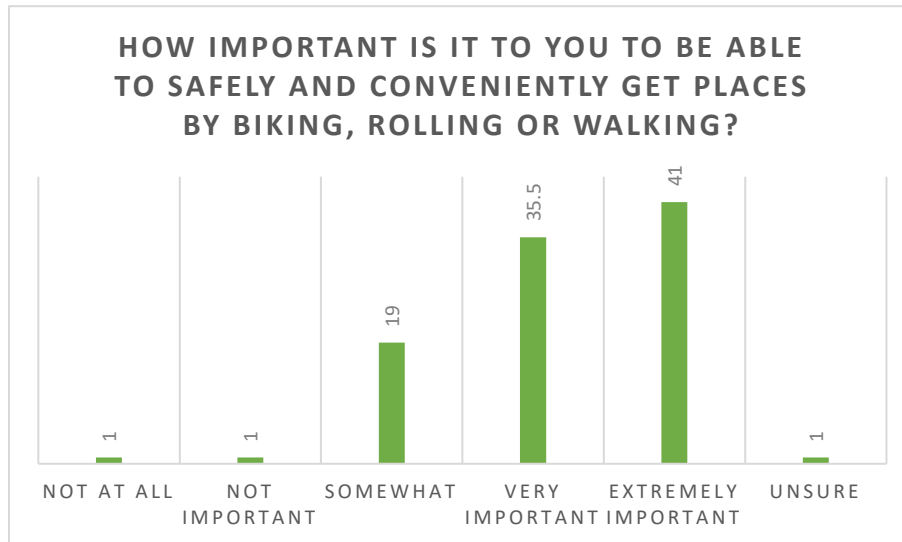
Affordable and diverse housing options were among top priorities, with nearly all youth saying that this was extremely or very important to them (Fig. 18). It is unsurprising that young people feel this way, given that Ontario is currently experiencing a housing crisis. This is also already a clear priority for governments. Because these survey questions were high-level, it would be interesting to get into the nuances of what youth want in terms of housing and how they feel about the housing crisis, as well as looking at the priorities between housing affordability and diversity.



(Fig. 18)

Mobility, specifically active transportation (walking, rolling or biking), was another clear priority for participants (Fig. 19). This is a central tenant of Complete Communities and the similar concept of 15-minute communities. Some research that has been done gives more insight into active transportation for children and youth. We know that active transportation is hugely beneficial for physical and mental health and reducing the likelihood of chronic conditions later in life (O'Brien, 2005; Gilbert & O'Brien, 2005; Bruntlett & Bruntlett, 2021). We also know that using active transportation to commute to school has positive impacts on academic performance, attention and social behaviours (O'Brien & Tranter, 2006).





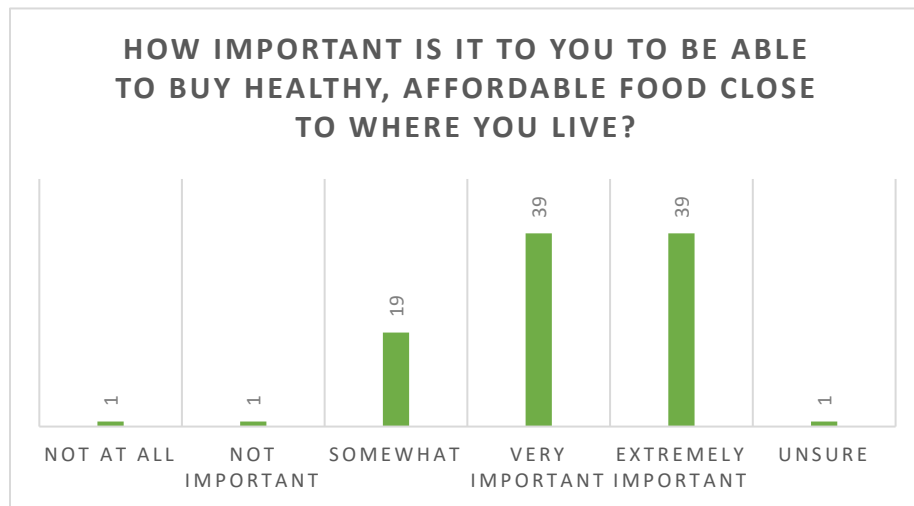
(Fig. 19)

While active transportation was a top priority, having essential services close to home was a moderate priority (Fig. 20). This could imply that currently, having essential services close to home is not as much of a priority because many people drive or rely on car use, especially considering that many youth cannot yet drive. If this question was taken with the assumption of active transportation, the responses could look different. As with the nature of any survey question, more insight could be attained through further in-depth research; for example, exploring what youth consider to be 'essential services' or 'basic needs', as this could look different from what adults consider to be essential services. Youths' priorities should be equally considered when building 15-minute communities and in land-use planning generally (Gilbert & O'Brien, 2005). Additionally, some basics, like grocery shopping, often fall to adults in a household and may not be as relevant for youth, thus reflecting this slightly lower priority. That being said, nearly all of the respondents rated having essential services close to home as having some degree of importance to them.



(Fig. 20)

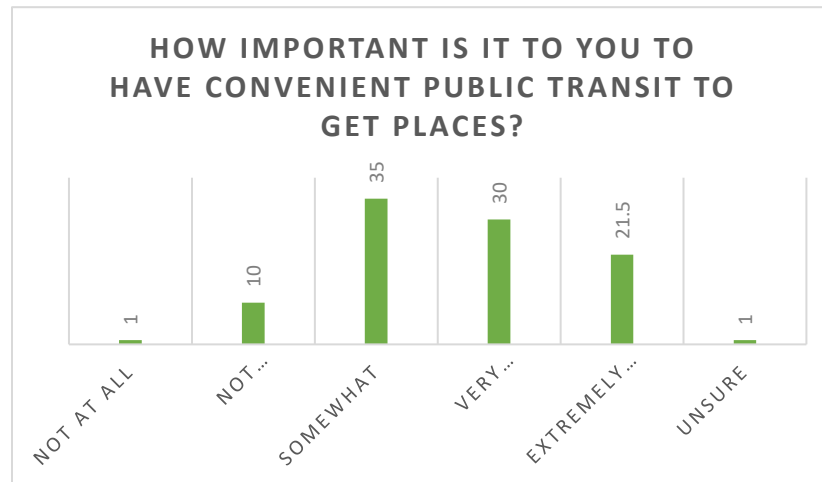
Access to healthy, affordable food close to home is another clear priority for these youth. Nearly 80% of participants said this was either very or extremely important to them (Fig. 21). This implies that young people want communities where grocery stores and markets are walkable from their homes. This is another hallmark of 15-minute communities. It also shows that youth likely value healthy foods as well as affordable food prices.



(Fig. 21)

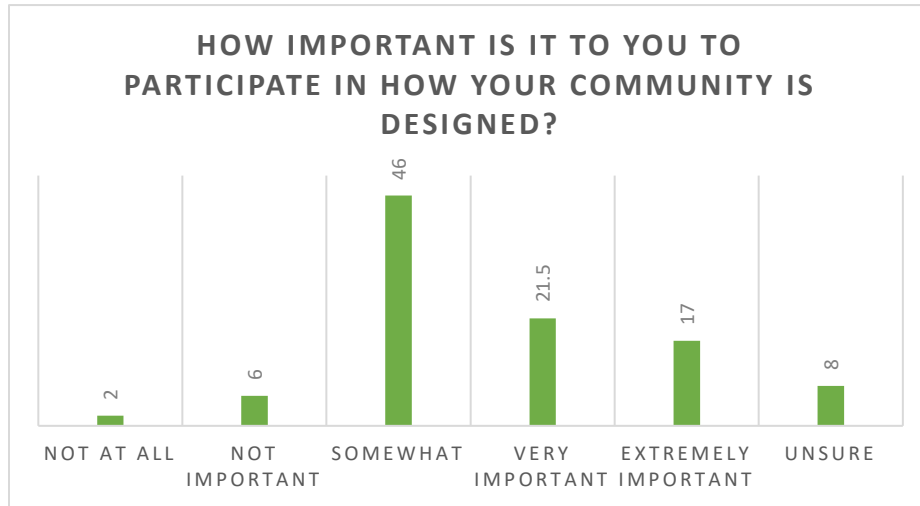
Convenient public transit was a moderate priority for respondents, with about half saying that this was very or extremely important and about a third saying that this was somewhat important to them (Fig. 22). Considering the dominance of car use and lack of robust public transit systems across Simcoe County municipalities and the fact that most young people rely on cars to get around, this could reflect quite a shift from the norm and towards higher public transportation use.

Together with the shift to public transportation in recent trends and outlined as a goal in the Growth Plan (Government of Ontario, 2020), planning for less car dependency in future communities is essential and should be considered a high priority for municipal planning within and between regions. 15-minute community planning is part of achieving this goal, because robust public transit systems require transit-supportive density in neighbourhoods. Most suburban neighbourhoods across the County do not yet have transit-supportive density, or have only enough density for basic service. Higher frequency service could be achieved with gentle density and infill in existing neighbourhoods.



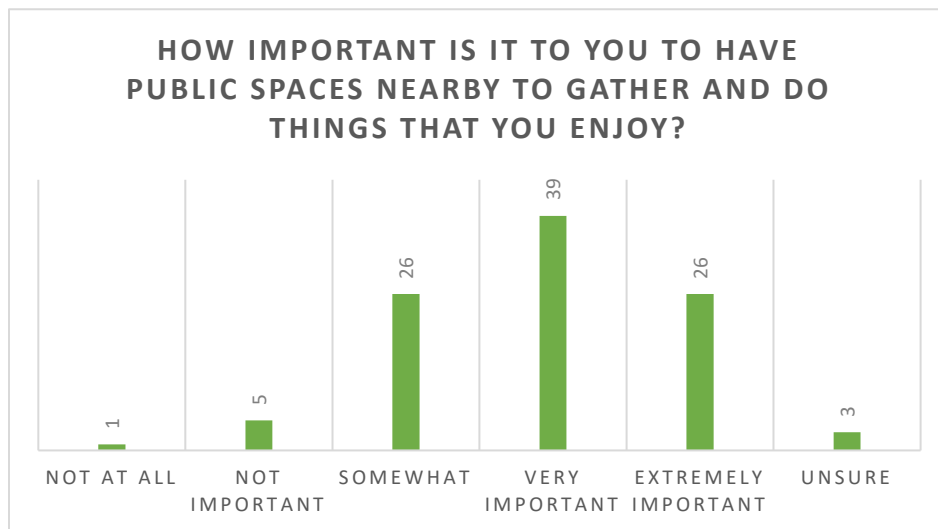
(Fig. 22)

Participating in community design was one of the lower priorities of participants, with about a third saying that this participation was very or extremely important to them and just under half of respondents said that it was somewhat important to them (Fig. 23). Despite this being a lower priority, it shows that a majority of youth ranked this as having some importance to them, albeit of lesser urgency compared to housing and environmental crises, for example.



(Fig. 23)

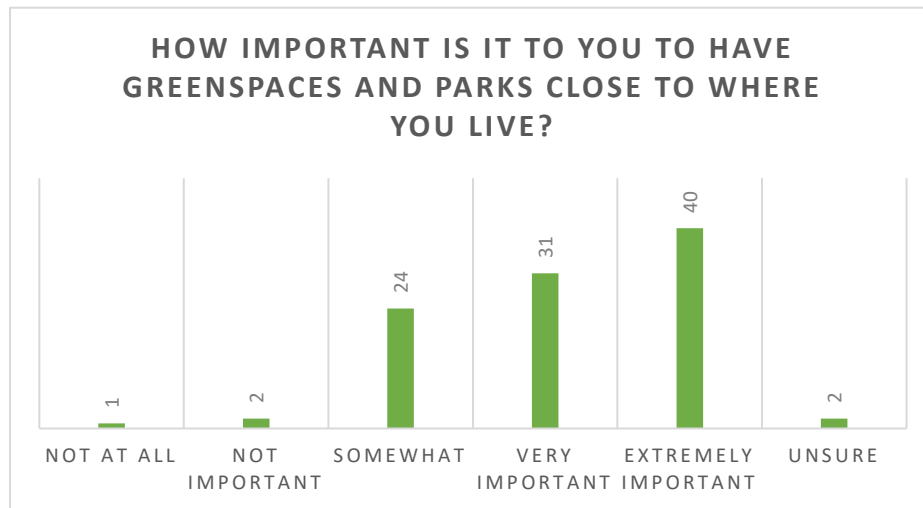
Another moderate priority was access to public spaces close to home. We did not operationalize what was considered a ‘public space’ aside from clarifying that these were the type of space where people could “gather and do things that you enjoy”, so that youth could decide that for themselves. About 75% said that this was very or extremely important to them (Fig. 24). This is unsurprising, as access to public spaces has become a priority in general for social interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic, while people have been avoiding gathering in their homes. We did not specify whether these were indoor or outdoor public spaces, because public space can include many different kinds of spaces. Young people clearly want accessible public places to gather and interact with one another. This indicates a desire to strengthen the public sphere.



(Fig. 24)



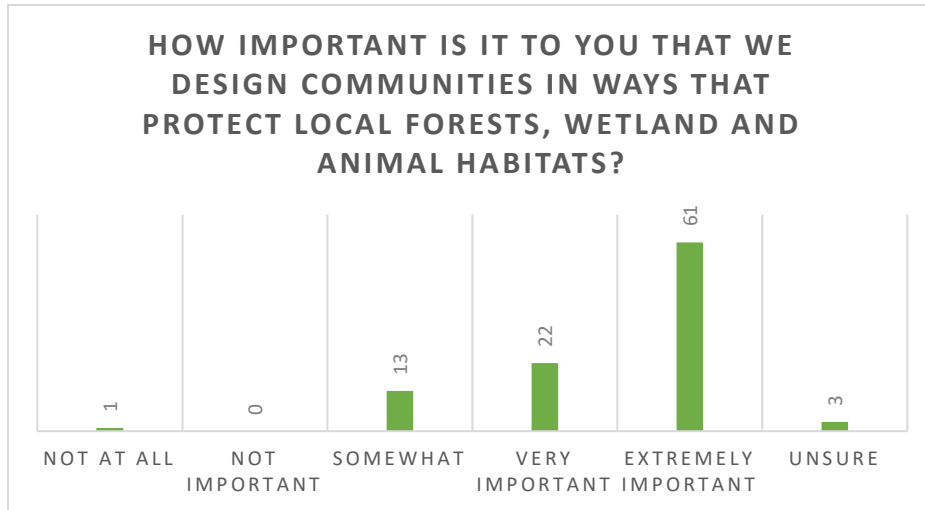
A top priority among participants was access to greenspaces and parks close to home (i.e., within walking distance). Considering that protecting the environment was top priority regarding climate adaptation among these youth as well, planning for natural areas and greenspaces in neighbourhoods appears to be extremely important to them (Fig. 25). This indicates a strong desire for more natural spaces and access to those natural spaces. Given the well documented physical and mental health benefits of spending time outdoors, this signals likely support for climate and health policies involving green infrastructure as well as the protection and revitalization of natural areas. This complements the well-known co-benefits of ecosystem services.



(Fig. 25)

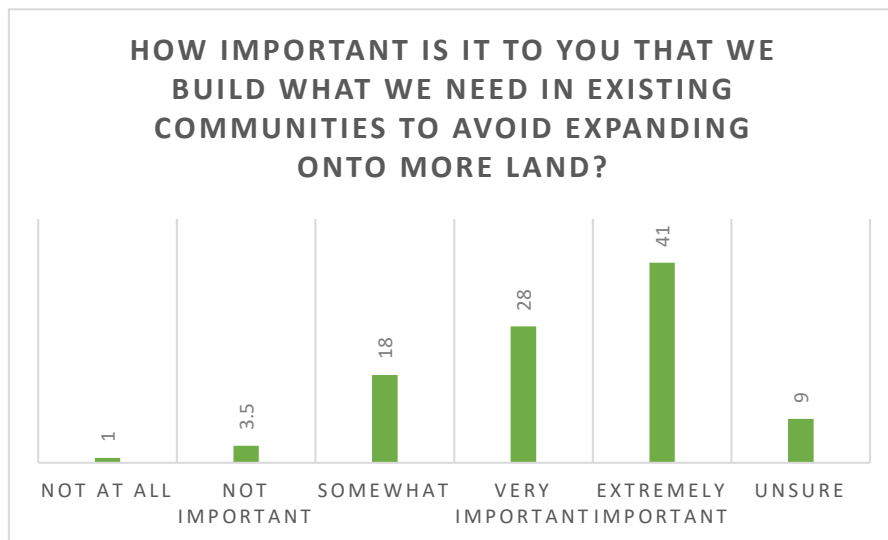
## Community Planning

Environmental protection when planning for growth in the communities that these youth will inherit is one of the main takeaways from this survey. One of the highest priorities for these young people was designing communities in ways that protect our local forests, wetlands and animal habitats. A majority of respondents said that this was extremely important to them, with about another third saying it was either 'very' or 'somewhat' important (Fig. 26). Natural areas are clearly a priority among the youth of Simcoe County, further supporting the need to protect these areas.



(Fig. 26)

These youth clearly prioritized building in instead of out, with about 70% saying that it was either very or extremely important that we build in existing communities instead of expanding on to more land (Fig. 27). In other words, this clearly indicates that intensification is preferred over sprawl for those who will live in the communities being planned during the MCR, reflecting concern for climate mitigation and environmental protection. Again, environmental protection is highly valued by young people.

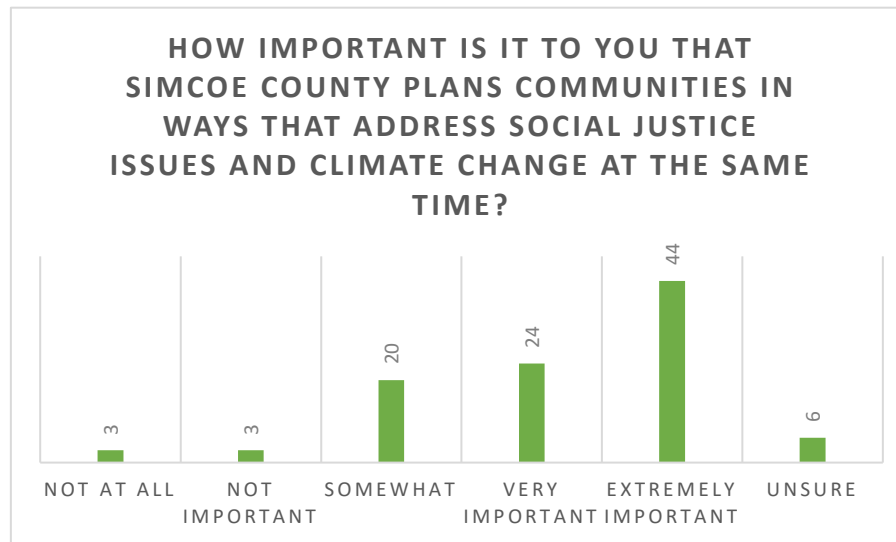


(Fig. 27)

Another top priority is that the County plan in ways that simultaneously address social justice issues and climate change (Fig. 28). In other words, a climate justice lens should



be used for all planning decisions (i.e., ‘mainstreaming’). We know that, with principles such as Just Recovery, many decisions can easily address social, health, economic and climate issues together. Youth seem to understand that climate and social issues are interconnected and must be addressed holistically. Considering that the communities these participants will live in are being planned today, this should be of utmost importance in planning and policy decisions. Principles of justice and equity (racial, economic, gender, etc) should be integrated meaningfully into community work and local decision making.



(Fig. 28)

The survey also asked, “Is there anything else that is important to you about what your community will look like in the future?”. This was an open ended question. Many responses simply expressed a desire for our society to treat the Earth better and have healthier relationships with the planet. Other common themes included: More greenspaces and trees (and food gardens/forests); more community/public spaces; reigning in sprawl and unsustainable development; more active transportation infrastructure and less roads/highways; affordability; other single responses included stricter composting rules, Land Back, and better emergency response to tornados.

Regarding feedback for the survey itself, most feedback was regarding the layout, especially on mobile devices. SurveyMonkey was the platform used, so perhaps considering a different survey tool in the future would be beneficial, especially for audiences who are likely to complete a survey on their mobile device. Otherwise, comments were split between wanting more explanation to preface the questions and wanting less explanations to preface the questions. This is an expected limitation of conducting a survey rather than a more qualitative form of research.

## Recommendations

Youth are concerned about the climate, want to see dramatic changes, and have a good understanding of many of the policy changes needed. This survey confirmed much of what we knew, but gave some insights into where and how to better engage local youth:

1. *Meet youth where they are at.* Climate action should start where youth are at, both in terms of knowledge and experience, and literally where they are at: schools, clubs, youth organizations, social media. Future partnerships and collaborations should attempt to include organizations/groups/institutions that are directed at youth or have youth programming, in addition to youth-led organizations. Reaching youth can be difficult for organizations whose audience or membership is largely adults (as we found with the challenges in reaching youth to complete this survey). Making an effort to reach more young people through social media and building relationships with youth locally is important, because youth are more likely to listen to their peers (especially those who may view many adults and institutions as jaded, distrustful or irrelevant to their priorities and experiences). Putting in the time to develop reciprocal relationships with youth and youth-led organizations can begin to build that trust and could lead to meaningful partnerships that benefit everyone involved, as well as the community.
2. *Educate the public about climate connections, especially youth.* Linking the interconnections between local planning and politics as well as the significance of local issues and initiatives with the broader narrative of climate change (i.e., what youth already know and are wanting to act on), will likely make these local actions more relevant to youth. This in turn will open up more possibilities for them to feel like they can do something in response to their low confidence in local government. Making these connections is critical in tackling an emergency with such far reach and intersectional impact. For example, one of the biggest disparities in these responses was youth ranking ‘designing our communities in ways that protect forests, wetland and animal habitat’ as overwhelmingly ‘extremely important’; ‘Simcoe County changing how we plan communities to adapt to climate change’, and ‘building what we need in existing communities to avoid expanding onto more land’ as overwhelmingly ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ important to them, yet ‘stopping urban sprawl’ was ranked as one of the climate adaptation strategies that was of lesser importance (with still nearly half of respondents saying that this was important to them) compared to other actions such as moving to renewables and environmental protections. This signals a potential gap in knowledge between urban planning and climate action. This makes sense, as much of the general public is not aware of this connection



either. Awareness around this connection, and other connections to social issues, such as housing or food security, can help people better understand what local climate action can look like. Making these connections create more possibilities of what forms local climate action can take, which makes it more accessible and relevant to more people. The more connections made, the more options and opportunities for people with diverse backgrounds, interests and priorities to take action where they are, so that everyone in the community can move towards climate justice.

3. *Link knowledge and awareness with action and advocacy.* We know from climate justice and climate education discourse that simply learning about or knowing about the impacts of climate change is not enough to move people to action – youth, the general public or policymakers. In fact, ‘doom and gloom’ narratives tend to move many people to apathy and *inaction*. Action-oriented approaches, on the other hand, move from awareness to action and and lessen feelings of disenchantment, apathy and distrust. Focusing resources on youth-led initiatives, roles and projects that are taken seriously and treated as legitimate is something that organizations and local governments would be wise to look into. Action-oriented initiatives, whether community-based or in schools, empower young people by actually *doing* something with their own hands about the Climate Emergency and other crises their communities are facing. This builds tangible narratives of hope and possibility that can co-exist with an understanding of the urgency and severity of the situation, which leads to a healthier response to the mental health impacts of climate change, and makes a concrete difference on the ground towards local climate justice.

This survey offers some insights into potential strategies to overcome barriers that youth are facing to participating in local climate action, and that governments and organizations are facing to youth engagement. Obviously, formal studies in Simcoe County could offer further insights and this is something that municipalities and community organizations may find helpful if they are looking to engage youth or identify more specific barriers to eliminate.

While technical terms such as ‘densification’ were not used in the survey for accessibility, these top priorities for the communities that youth want to live in are consistent with high-density development, strict urban boundaries and reduced car use, such as that in the concept of Complete Communities and 15-minute communities.

This information confirms that youth in Simcoe County are concerned about climate change, there are barriers to them participating in local action, and they want local governments to be making the changes necessary to address the Climate Emergency. It also confirms that aspects of Complete Communities, as outlined in the Growth Plan (Government of Ontario, 2020), resonate with the youth who participated in this survey,

particularly affordable, diverse housing and walkability (particularly to healthy, affordable food and greenspaces/parks). Youth also highly prioritize planning and building in ways that protect forests, wetlands and animal habitats (ranked higher than even affordable housing), building in existing communities to avoid expanding onto new land and designing communities in ways that address social justice at the same time as climate change. We also see that, outside of planning and policies, youth desired a strong ethic around protecting the natural environment. This is the spirit in which organizations and local governments should engage youth in their local advocacy and decision making.

We hope that this project and any insights gained from it can help or motivate other organizations and local governments to build on these efforts to identify and eliminate barriers that youth face in engaging with their communities. Similarly, we recognize that a survey is a small first step of what needs to be an ongoing process to create spaces for meaningful participation by youth in their communities, including decision making processes.

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