

Incorporating QR (Quick Response) codes on City of Toronto signage

Date:	August 26, 2013
To:	Government Management Committee
From:	Director of Strategic Communications
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

At its meeting on November 27, 28 and 29, 2012, City Council requested the City Manager, in consultation with appropriate staff and other relevant stakeholders, to report to the Government Management Committee on the feasibility of incorporating QR (Quick Response) codes on City of Toronto signage at parks, civic buildings and other public areas.

Given the evolving nature of the digital landscape and emergence of new technologies, the City must ensure it is leveraging new and existing channels to communicate and engage with an increasingly mobile audience. Over the past few years, the City has used QR codes as part of select programs and initiatives to communicate additional information to mobile users.

In consultation with relevant City divisions and program areas, this report outlines Strategic Communications' intent to implement a one-year pilot in Spring 2014 to assess the value and usage of QR codes as a method of providing additional information and communication to a mobile audience, including residents, businesses and visitors. The pilot project will include applying QR codes on select existing City parks and public square signage, new planning application signs for proposed developments and at nine historic sites, and will be timed to coincide with the start of the busy summer season.

Critical to the success of this pilot will be coordinating its implementation with the upgrade of the City's current website, which is not optimized for mobile devices. The Web Revitalization Project is a separate initiative currently underway, which, among other improvements, will make the City's external website mobile-friendly by the end of 2013. Since QR codes are intended to point mobile users to web pages for more information, before considering expanding the use of QR codes, it is important to ensure the City's website is mobile-friendly and promotes a positive online and user experience.

In an effort to minimize costs, the development of new signage is not being proposed. As part of the one-year pilot, QR code decals will be generated, produced and applied to select signage using existing staff resources and budgets as follows, and as outlined in the Comments section:

- park signs at the City's featured parks
- appropriate public square signage (application of a QR code will be dependent on the physical location, design and material used for the sign)
- new planning application signs for proposed developments (template to be provided by the City and produced by the applicants)
- nine of the City's historic sites

Unique URLs would be used to generate the QR codes to ensure the City is able to capture accurate and valuable information about the number of users visiting City web pages via the QR code.

As the City currently has limited data about the use and effectiveness of QR codes to communicate and engage with the public, a pilot would provide valuable, tangible data about QR code usage in Toronto. Equipped with this information, the City would be better positioned to consider the appropriateness of using QR codes, along with other social media and digital communications tools on City signage and communication materials, to enhance mobile experiences and access to City information.

RECOMMENDATION

The Director of Strategic Communications recommends that:

The Government Management Committee receive this report for information.

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact to incorporating QR codes as part of a one-year pilot project since the production and application of QR codes would be managed internally using existing City resources and budgets.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of November 27, 28 and 29, 2012, City Council adopted Member Motion MM28.12 from Councillor Vincent Crisanti, seconded by Councillor Sarah Doucette, requesting the City Manager, in consultation with appropriate staff and other relevant stakeholders, to report to the Government Management Committee on the feasibility of incorporating QR codes on City of Toronto signage at parks, civic buildings and other public areas.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.MM28.12>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The City of Toronto recognizes the importance of finding new ways to communicate and engage with residents, businesses and visitors. Digital communications and social media tools provide additional opportunities to reach and connect with the public, and provide information about City programs, services, events and initiatives. According to one recent survey, 52% of Canadians own a smartphone, 29% surf the Internet using a mobile phone and 45% of smartphone owners have a 2D barcode scanner (QR code reader) installed on their devices*. While the same survey suggests smartphone ownership has increased over previous years, the use of QR codes remains stable. A pilot project to incorporate the use of QR codes on select City of Toronto signage would provide real data about the use and effectiveness of this mobile technology in Toronto.

*Source: AskingCanadians, 2013. AskingCanadians is an online research community that surveys its 250,000 members annually on their digital and mobile behaviours.

COMMENTS

Over the past few years, the City has expanded its use of social media platforms as well as digital technologies, such as QR codes, to provide information to a “social” and mobile audience. QR codes are a convenient way of providing additional information to users of mobile devices, particularly when space is limited. The City has used QR codes on various communication and promotional materials, including posters, brochures and advertisements, as a means of reaching a broader audience and providing additional information. The City currently does not have any reliable data to support the continued or expanded use of QR codes as an effective means of communicating and engaging with the public. Therefore, a pilot project will be undertaken starting in Spring 2014 involving select City signage in order to gather valuable evidence and data about the use and effectiveness of incorporating QR codes on City signage. If successful, the pilot will also support the goals of improving customer service, providing greater access to City information and connecting with new audiences.

As part of the pilot project, QR codes will be applied to select, existing City signs and locations as follows:

- **Parks, Forestry and Recreation – Featured Parks**
 - Toronto Islands
 - Conservatories & Greenhouses
 - Scarborough Bluffs
 - Bike Parks
 - Rouge Park
 - Toronto Music Garden
 - High Park
 - Riverdale Farm
 - HTO Park
 - Humber Bay Butterfly Habitat
 - Yorkville Park

- **Facilities Management – Squares**
 - Albert Campbell Square (at the Scarborough Civic Centre)
 - David Pecaut Square (at Metro Hall)
 - Mel Lastman Square (at North York Civic Centre)
 - Nathan Phillips Square (at City Hall)

Based on the design and location of the signage at David Pecaut Square, it would be relatively simple to introduce a QR code on the existing signage. Staff will explore the feasibility of placing QR code decals on the signage at the other above-mentioned public squares. Due to the physical location of the existing signs, the material used or the general design of the signs, it may not be appropriate or feasible to add a QR code decal to some of the signs.

- **City Planning – Planning Applications for new Development Proposals**

Development application signs are produced by the applicants based on a template that is provided by the City. As part of the pilot, a QR code will be incorporated into the City’s sign template, which would result in no additional cost to applicants.

- **Economic Development and Culture – Historic Sites (Museums)**
 - Colborne Lodge
 - Fort York
 - Gibson House
 - Mackenzie House
 - Montgomery’s Inn
 - Scarborough Museum
 - Spadina Museum
 - Todmorden Mills Heritage Site
 - Historic Zion Schoolhouse

Staff will explore applying QR code decals to existing signage or at site entrances, depending on the design, material and location of the signs, as well as the type of entranceway (e.g. glass doors).

In addition to the potential benefits of the pilot, it is also worth highlighting potential risks, including increased vandalism to the signs and QR code decals, as well as other decals being applied over the City decals directing mobile users to other websites. As part of the pilot, staff will also measure the occurrence of these types of activities to determine the ongoing sustainment costs of monitoring the signage and replacing any necessary QR code decals.

CONTACT

Francine Antonio Forte
Manager, Digital Communications
Tel: 416-397-5318
Email: fantoni@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Jackie DeSouza
Director, Strategic Communications