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## Tweeting Traffic Tips

BY LAURIE MCBURNEY

Local volunteer helps Kingston drivers arrive home safely

It's June 2011. Kingston resident Cristiano Vilela is stuck in traffic on the highway and he's frustrated. As a mobile mortgage specialist for the Bank of Montreal, Vilela frequently travels the roads around Kingston to meet clients. It's a competitive business and it's important to make his appointments on time.

"I was thinking, 'I wish there was a place where I could go and check before I went on the road to see if there were any issues I wanted to avoid,'" says Vilela. Something clicked in his subconscious.

"I always pay particular attention in my own mind when I hear myself saying, 'I wish someone had....,' because that generally tells me that it might be something I might be able to undertake and it might be worth doing," he says.

Vilela is a busy man as a father of three

young kids and as a volunteer with the Limestone New Media Group and Sustain-

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able Kingston. So, when he finally got a minute that night, he sat down at his com-

puter and set up a new Twitter account. He gave it the handle @YGKTraffic. 'YGK,' the city's airport code, is used to identify Kingston on the social media site.

He then sent out his first tweet – a heads up to other commuters about road construction he'd just encountered. More traffic observations followed as the days went by. He scoured Twitter for information that might be of interest to commuters, retweeting information from Kingston Police, the City of Kingston, Utilities Kingston, among others.

Suddenly, Kingston residents who used Twitter were hearing about accidents, slippery roads, flooding and tie-ups in real-time, instead of waiting for traffic reports on their radios. In a very short period of time, @YGKTraffic had 50 followers. Then a surprising thing happened. Instead of just passively reading the information, people

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started tweeting to Vilela what they observed on their travels. Suddenly, @YGKTraffic was sharing information from dozens of people, including long-distance truck drivers and local firefighters.

Over 8,500 people now follow @YGKTraffic and more follow two sister accounts created by Vilela; @LandGTraffic, concerning traffic in Leeds and Grenville, and @QuinteTraffic in Quinte. Followers include city councillors, the police and even news organizations – once the source for traffic information. During a massive construction site fire in downtown Kingston on Dec. 17, 2013 and the record-setting ice storm that followed on Dec. 21, @YGKTraffic was quoted repeatedly in national media coverage.

"(It's) become an invaluable tool in our community," says Kingston city councillor Sandy Berg, who calls Vilela her "Twitter mentor." "I rarely drive Hwy. 401 without checking @YGKTraffic to see if any traffic problems exist."

Kingston Police Const. Steve Koopman agrees. "The content from @YGKTraffic is extremely valuable, and I think a testament to the wonderful experiment of crowdsourcing, where Cris' account, with his direction and guidance acts as a conduit of real-time status updates concerning our roadways and traffic flow," he says.

Crowdsourcing can also lead to a proliferation of information that is incorrect, but Vilela has found just the opposite. He says those who follow the account are quick to jump on mistakes. "Where things are inflated to be more than they are or inaccurate, I very quickly get information from somebody else saying, 'I went through that area a while ago, there's no issue,' or 'it's not as bad as it seems.' It's incredible how the community will correct itself," he says.

One thing you won't find on the Twitter page is the locations of RIDE programs or speed traps, and that's important to police officers like Koopman. "We are very fortunate to have a person like Cris...he understands the challenges the police and other emergency responders face concerning traffic," he says.

"Decreasing the effectiveness of those programs is something I'm vehemently against," says Vilela. He points out that while the account's Twitter handle is "@YGKTraffic" the actual name of the account is "Make It Home YGK."

"The entire reason for @YGKTraffic is so people arrive home safely; so they can see their loved ones at the end of the day," Vilela says. **K**