

SURREY, BC COMMUNITY SUMMIT

Gord Hume...April 9, 2013

Hosting and organizing a Community Summit is a big undertaking for any city, but it is a very smart effort to reach out and engage the community.

Surrey, BC hosted its 1st Community Summit on Saturday, and I had the honour of being their keynote speaker. More than 200 community leaders jammed into the Simon Fraser University campus auditorium in downtown Surrey for a day-long event. The energy in the place was amazing, as feisty, engaged and dedicated people from across Surrey spent the day listening, talking, sharing and debating.

Mayor Dianne Watts and a very progressive City Council were key players. The day was entitled “Connecting People and Neighbourhoods”, and was a smash success. Break-out workshops included such diverse and important topics as:

- Community gardening and Urban gardening
- Connecting with Youth today
- Municipal 101—getting to know city hall
- Surrey 2050—the Vision
- Welcoming community for New Canadians
- Where’s the family?
- Becoming a community leader
- City Beautification
- Connecting Neighbours
- Identifying Community Assets and Resources
- Sustainability in Surrey
- Vibrant Neighbourhoods, block by block

Live feeds on various social media of the keynote speeches and sessions spurred further chatter. The entire day was a vibrant discussion as people came together to build their community. It was energizing, exciting and important for the next steps in Surrey’s rapid development.

Participants ranged from the ranking Superintendent of the RCMP to a newly-arrived doctor and his wife from India who had just made Surrey their home three months ago. The enthusiasm was palpable, and participants came away inspired, committed and determined to make their city grow and prosper in sustainable and community-driven ways.

As cities search for new community engagement ideas, hosting a Community Summit is becoming one of the most important opportunities for a smart city. It taps into that energy and spirit that so many citizens bring, and is a unique opportunity to engage young people as well.

At a time of cynicism and distrust of the political process—and just as sadly, too often the politicians in the system—it was remarkable to see the high level of discussion and passion that those attending brought to the day.

Local governments have long proclaimed that they are the order of government closest to their people, and generally I would agree with that. But it has to happen with a strategy in mind, and with a commitment to follow-up, to implement, to continue being engaged, to drive action and not just words. If local Councils can't leverage that strength of closeness and connection, then what value does it have for that community?

Well organized and cleverly managed, the Surrey Community Summit was a success on every level. Other cities should be looking at this kind of initiative. It is not just community engagement, it was community building.

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