

# Metro Vancouver city halls reaching out to the people

## Local councils recognize thriving communities start with getting citizens involved

BY DARAH HANSEN, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 24, 2013



Vancouver resident Cora Maming spent two years hiding inside her home after arriving from the Philippines in 2008. Help from her neighbourhood house helped her with English lessons and confidence, and now Maming now is happily participating in her community.

**Photograph by:** Arlen Redekop, Vancouver Sun

Meet Cora Maming. The busy, bubbly 68-year-old has only a few minutes to talk before she's off to a workshop in her Collingwood-Renfrew neighbourhood teaching health and safety to seniors. Later, she'll drop by the Collingwood Neighbourhood House, a community facility partly funded by the City of Vancouver, for a quick visit with volunteers and staff before heading home to cook dinner for her daughter and grandchildren.

But Maming wants to share her story.

It begins with a woman painfully alone and isolated from the world around her. A newcomer to Vancouver in 2008 from Manila, Philippines, Maming hid inside her southeast Vancouver home for two years, until 2010.

It wasn't any one thing that paralyzed her. Rather it was a complex combination of things led by long-held insecurities and fear of the unknown.

Mostly, she recalls now, she was ashamed of her inability to speak English fluently and with an accent

that was, at least in her mind, distinctly not Canadian.

Her son, concerned for his mother's safety, warned her not to talk to strangers. So Maming didn't talk to anyone.

But this is ultimately an inspirational tale, and an example of the good that can happen when someone becomes involved in their community.

In Maming's case, it took one session of English as a Second Language at her local neighbourhood house, along with some gentle coaxing from the staff and her family, to start her on her journey from isolation to engagement.

Three years later, she is happier, healthier and a bona fide force to be reckoned with: volunteering, Zumba dancing, hosting block parties.

"I have many, many friends now," Maming says with satisfaction.

It's exactly the kind of happy ending the City of Vancouver would like to replicate about 600,000 times over if it could.

Indeed, "citizen engagement" is all the talk at city hall these days as urban leaders here join in what is fast becoming a North American-wide movement to find new and better ways to connect with an increasingly disconnected citizenry.

"Civic engagement is really fundamental to democracy," said Mayor Gregor Robertson [at the launch earlier this week](#) of a preliminary report that outlines 16 strategic steps Vancouver can immediately take to boost engagement, everything from initiating a mobile city hall that would deliver basic city services to neighbourhoods to encouraging participatory budgeting, where residents would make budget decisions on local improvements.

"It's important that the ideas, the opinions and the actions from our residents are brought forward and shared and that they infuse the decisions that the city makes going forward," Robertson said.

The move comes amid dismal voter participation rates, particularly at the municipal level. Cynical and angry about a political process many feel they have no ability to change, only 35 per cent of Vancouver's eligible voters turned out to cast a ballot in the 2011 civic election. In 2004, the turnout was even lower, at 30 per cent.

A study produced last year by the Vancouver Foundation underscored people's growing detachment from not only governments, but also each other. The survey found a disturbing trend among young people, people living in condos and highrises, immigrants and seniors all of whom reported feelings of isolation and alienation.

The more languages spoken in a neighbourhood, the less people trusted each other, the study found.

Citizen engagement has always mattered, said Coun. Andrea Reimer, council's liaison to a task force convened earlier this year to address the engagement issue.

But, she added, there have been “blinking warning signs on the dashboard” for years that the social capital cities depend on to make them stronger and safer places to live and do business has been eroding.

Vision Vancouver, led by Robertson, made civic engagement an election issue in 2011, promising at the time to look for more harmonious ways for the city, community and developers to work with each other.

But it wasn't until the Vancouver Foundation's eye-opening research was published that it became abundantly clear more work was going to be needed.

“There was this big ‘aha’ moment,” Reimer said.

The simple theory behind civic engagement says people who are engaged with city hall or government are the same people who engaged with each other, and vice versa.

To that end, cities across Metro Vancouver have taken baby steps toward improving that engagement, including signing up to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to inform citizens about what's going on.

Most also offer live-streaming of council meetings and open houses and Surrey, Burnaby and Pitt Meadows have designed mobile apps to keep citizens informed.

Last month Surrey launched an online citizen forum called City Speak where residents can sign up to give their views on policy decisions and future directions for the city through polls, surveys, discussions and brainstorming sessions each month. The city also held a community summit on the topic last month.

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts said civic engagement has become “the cornerstone of everything we do.” The city has seen a lot of acrimony in the past between city councillors and local community groups stemming from a lack of consultation.

Pitt Meadows council was so fed-up with low turnout at its open houses on major issues like housing, transportation and budgets that it's taking drastic action: if the masses won't come to the council chambers, the council will go to them.

A council meeting has already been scheduled for next month at a seniors centre, while in September, councillors will visit a high school. Both meetings will include regular council business but will be tailored to the different demographics with delegations, for instance, from the RCMP on senior and youth safety.

“It seems you always see the same six to eight people all the time,” Pitt Meadows Mayor Deb Walters said. “In this day and age, people are so busy and for them, it's another meeting. We're finding we have to go to the people a bit more.”

Vancouver will also launch its version of a mobile city hall over the next few months, borrowing from the city of Boston, which uses a retrofitted food truck to deliver basic city services directly to neighbourhoods.

Canadian Gord Hume, an author and public speaker on issues of engagement and cultural planning, applauded efforts made to date.

“When you have a better educated public, you have a more engaged and aware public. It makes for better decisions by city councillors,” he said.

It’s a far cry from when Hume was first elected to city council in London, Ontario in the 1990s. Back then, he said, “you’d hold a basic public meeting in a library or a room at city hall with a few maps tacked up on the walls. People would wander in and staff would answer questions.

“Nowadays, we have 3-D animation, computer graphics, cultural-mapping opportunities. These are all ways for people to see what could be ... and it is a much more interesting process.”

But Hume warned Vancouver and other Canadian cities have more to lose than just citizen goodwill if they fail to get those connections right. It could also mean a loss of our best and brightest to urban centres deemed more vibrant, innovative or interesting.

“Young people ... aren’t bothered by borders anymore. They can, and will, move to Beijing or Barcelona or Boston,” said Hume.

Not everyone is a fan of Vision’s engagement plans.

George Affleck, a Vancouver city councillor representing the Non-Partisan Association, said it’s hard not to be cynical about the ruling Vision party’s proposals to promote an engaged city.

“We’re talking about a political party here ... who, for the last five years, has spent more time destroying the public’s confidence in the public process than any other political party in the history of the city,” he said.

Affleck said if the city is serious about strengthening trust within the community, elected officials would be wise to rein in what he called rude and disrespectful attitudes displayed towards those who don’t share Vision’s ideas.

Notably, he recalled Mayor Robertson’s notorious outburst in July 2010 when he was overheard to call some speakers “hacks” during a fiery hearing over proposals to build two tall towers in the West End.

The mayor and Vision councillors were also widely slammed for failing to adequately consult with residents over a controversial “affordability” strategy that would see high-density housing developed along Vancouver’s major arterial routes. Several neighbourhood community associations, residents’ groups and committees complained they were not given adequate time to study the recommendations before a plan was approved.

Robertson defended the housing strategy at the time, saying citizens had several opportunities to share their input on findings of the study in the months before the vote.

Retired University of B.C. political scientist Paul Tennant said government concern over citizen engagement, or lack thereof, is nothing new.

In Vancouver, Art Phillips is credited for being the first mayor to deliberately seek direction from the residents who put him in power. That was in the 1970s.

Among those early efforts, Phillips held council meetings in neighbourhood centres outside of city hall. It was a radical concept — symbolic of bringing city hall to the people.

“In New York and Chicago, even today, if you talk about ‘Vancouverizing’, they know exactly what you mean,” Tennant said of the lasting impact of those early efforts.

Efforts to recreate the spirit of that era, though with a distinctly modern twist given technological advancements, aren’t a bad thing. But Tennant said they are unlikely to translate into substantially different results, although they might encourage a few more people to get involved at the polls or in their community.

Phillips was swept into power at time when citizens rallied together to protest a proposed freeway through the city. That type of event is what it takes to really galvanize people to bring about change, Tennant said, adding that’s unlikely to happen in today’s Vancouver, where there is not a singular issue to polarize people.

What might be going on with all the engagement talk is good, old-fashioned politics, Tennant said. “A city that is seeking engagement of its citizens is not fundamentally worried about what is going on,” said Tennant. “But it wants to make sure that there aren’t a lot of unhappy people it hasn’t heard from.”

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