

Opinion: Residents get chance to speak up on future of Surrey

Community summit builds on success of town halls

BY DIANNE WATTS, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 4, 2013



Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, PROVINCE

Connecting and engaging our citizens is the cornerstone of our service.

We are building a city from the ground up and we want our residents and businesses to help us shape growth and create vibrant communities. In order to achieve this goal, we need to continually engage the public in a relevant, inclusive and productive way.

The City of Surrey recently launched the next phase in the community consultation program, a long-term, online initiative with B.C.-based technology company Vision Critical called City Speaks: Your Surrey, Your Say. It's a new opportunity for us to connect with the community, and it will allow people to provide ongoing input regarding policies, programs and plans for Surrey.

We all lead busy lives and we can't always attend open houses, public hearings, or other information sessions. But input matters and we want you to have your say, on your time. The City Speaks community will be a place for brainstorming, surveys, and discussions about current and future plans.

This initiative will bring the public into the decision-making process in a more accessible way – via

computers, smartphones and tablets. And the city is setting out to build the next generation of engaged Surrey citizens, too, so it will be encouraging youth 16 years of age and older to join the discussions. The information gathered will help shape the future of the city.

Surrey is one of the first municipalities in North America to undergo such a long-term, comprehensive consultation process.

Vision Critical is already a homegrown global leader in the online research sphere.

The partnership with this company, founded by Canada's best-known pollster, Angus Reid, will help it improve communication, accountability and transparency.

And, for the first time ever on Saturday, the city will host a community summit which will bring together community leaders, urban planning experts and the public. We want to open up the channels of communication and create a meaningful, interactive forum.

The event is taking place at SFU Surrey and the keynote speaker will be Gord Hume, one of Canada's leading voices on municipal government, cultural planning and creative cities. Participants will also hear from Jason Roberts, an urban planning consultant and founder of the Better Block Project, a unique campaign to help revitalize neighbourhoods. Panel sessions will be held on a variety of topics from transportation to connecting with youth to transforming public spaces.

The initiatives build on the success of the city's town hall meetings last year and are part of Surrey's new community consultation framework, which was established in 2011 by a committee comprised of representatives from 38 community associations. This framework is now used as a basis for communications between the City and the people we serve.

Our residents and businesses are our greatest assets and a strong community is achieved through collaboration. As our city evolves and we plan for the future, it's imperative that our goals align with the needs of the community. So, I encourage people to join with us — we all have a vested interest to ensure that we are building a cohesive and vibrant city.

Dianne Watts is the mayor of Surrey. For more information on the community summit, visit www.surrey.ca/engagement.

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