Connecting in the City
2012 Community Summit
Mayors’ Roundtable Dialogue
Sept 21, 2012 Report

alone together
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Presentation: Key Findings of the Vancouver Foundation Study

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Executive Summary

On September 21st, the SFU Public Square and the Vancouver Foundation hosted a Mayors’ Roundtable Dialogue with 17 local government officials. Its purposes were threefold:

- to present the results of research conducted by the Vancouver Foundation on isolation and community connectedness in Metro Vancouver and potential drivers of change;
- to provide officials with an opportunity to share insights on what has and has not worked in their municipalities to address isolation and build connectivity; and,
- to consider practical initiatives that local government can lead, sponsor or promote to build greater connectivity.

The Vancouver Foundation provided delegates with a series of reports detailing their findings including an exclusive report with results for Vancouver, Burnaby, Surrey and Richmond.

The roundtable dialogue let mayors and deputy mayors probe the Vancouver Foundation research and recommend areas for further inquiry. Delegates also mapped effective municipal activities and initiatives for addressing social isolation and disconnection and identified gaps for further action.

The following themes emerged through the discussion:

- The Vancouver Foundation’s research has demonstrated that the issues of isolation and disconnection are increasingly affecting Metro Vancouver residents, and this has significant negative consequences for the community. Delegates recommended that the Foundation research regional differences and the relationship of fear and religion on feelings of isolation and disconnection. Mayors would also like to see research that highlights effective strategies to connect and mobilize youth, research on social isolation from other jurisdictions and a repeat of the same survey in 3 to 5 years to test for shifts in attitudes.
Changing demographics (including population growth and an increase in diversity), growing levels of political apathy, and urban densification have all contributed to isolation and disconnection within municipalities. These factors continue to create obstacles for policy makers seeking to promote engagement and connectivity.

Metro Vancouver’s municipalities have tried successful and innovative strategies to bring residents together and involve the community in decision making processes:
- Bringing youth and seniors together to cook a community meal once a week
- Hosting a Saturday morning Mayors’ Walk in a local park
- Creating and empowering community member-based advisory groups and task forces
- Supporting community gardens, urban farms and “Fusion” festivals

Metro Vancouver mayors recognized that while there are a number of initiatives that are working, more needs to be done. Knowledge sharing is a first step.

At the session, the Vancouver Foundation announced their desire to expand their Small Neighbourhood Grants Program as a demonstrated commitment to addressing the issue of isolation and disconnection in the region. SFU also invited delegates to outline how the university could better support municipalities through research and convening.

The following report provides a detailed summary of the dialogue. As this session was governed by Chatham House Rule, the proceedings are provided without attribution.

When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. http://www.chathamhouse.org
Context Setting

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All parties agreed to conduct the meeting under Chatham House Rule, to encourage an open and productive dialogue and the sharing of information. Under Chatham House Rule, dialogue participants are free to use and share the information discussed, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

Building Connections in Metro Vancouver Municipalities, Successes and Challenges

Metro Vancouver representatives were each asked to share one challenge and one success they have had in building connections within their respective municipalities. The following challenges and successes were mentioned:

**SUCCESSES**

- **Civic Engagement**
  - Creating and utilizing a civic engagement task force (that created a report of recommendations to deal with questions of engagement; many of which have been put into action)
  - Using a working group model to solve problems (people who can bring resources and time)
  - Using public input and involvement to create a community plan
  - Hosting community forums and engaging residents (of, e.g. condos) to deal with specific issues
  - Fostering engagement through the Greenest City project
  - Getting people excited about a municipal election

- **Community Centres**
  - Investing in an events centre that meets the needs of citizens
  - Melding seniors’ and youth centres, and providing opportunities for leadership

- **Community Events**
  - Taking them out of City Hall (e.g. into community centres) to drive engagement
  - Hosting community festivals

- **Community Outreach**
  - Creating community recognition channels
  - Supporting community outreach through volunteer organizations
  - Working with smaller community groups to empower residents and support community involvement
  - Building relationships between municipal institutions
  - Building up and improving the ‘downtown’
  - Playing off of existing assets (features that drew people to the city in the first place)

**CHALLENGES**

- **Changing demographics**
  - General population growth
  - Young families with little time to get out into the community
  - Fast growth; gap between infrastructure and services, and population growth

- **Diversity (in age and cultural background) within the region**
  - Engaging different demographics, particularly those residents who, culturally, are not familiar with being engaged or connected in their communities
  - Cultural differences and language barriers; how to involve and provide services to those of various cultural backgrounds and those who are non-English speakers

- **Engaging the general public in policy development and ensuring decisions are made with community support**

- **Resource constraints (i.e. staff and facilities capacities)**

- **Inequality around what gets heard, e.g. the media tends to intensify certain voices (usually dissidents) over others; the same characters get repeated coverage and those who don’t want controversy are often excluded**

- **Politics of the day; not getting caught up in them, and moving forward**

- **Melding land use and saving farmland, and fostering understanding among urban residents of the needs of those in agricultural areas and vice versa**

- **The increasing trend of apartment / condo living and getting those residents involved and connected**
The Vancouver Foundation research process and findings were described as follows:

Sentis Market Research Inc. conducted the metro Vancouver-wide survey in Spring 2012, surveying 3,841 residents, in multiple (4) languages, to gain an understanding of how people experience life in metro Vancouver on three levels: personal friendships, including friendships across ethnicity; connections to neighbours and neighbourhood; relationships and attitudes toward the larger community. The survey also investigated residents’ participation in various aspects of community life and explored what prevents people from being more connected and engaged. The sample size was large enough in four municipalities (Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby and Richmond) to provide a comparison between these municipalities. Mayors were also provided with cross tabs showing how respondents in each of their municipalities answered all the survey questions.

Some highlights from the survey’s findings include:

- Neighbourhood connections between residents are cordial but weak
- Forging meaningful relationships is difficult for many, particularly across ethnicity
- People between the ages of 25 and 34 are some of the least engaged, most isolated and most pessimistic residents
- People who live in high rise apartments and suites in houses are among the least connected and least engaged in neighbourhood and community life

There has been an incredible reaction to the research findings among community organizations, residents, media and government. In spite of this interest, there are still people who question the usefulness of the findings, and acting upon them. Some wonder, “Isn’t this just the price we pay for living in an urban environment?; does it really matter?” The Vancouver Foundation’s analysis of the survey data shows the negative consequences of isolation and lack of engagement, for individuals and for the community at large.

In sum, feelings of loneliness and isolation affect a person’s attitudes and actions in ways that have negative consequences for the entire community.

The survey also revealed interesting findings related to diversity in Vancouver. For instance, the results showed that 1 out of 3 residents have no close friends outside their own ethnic group. They also revealed that respondents of Chinese descent have fewer interactions with neighbours than those of other backgrounds, and have a lower sense of neighbourhood trust and less belief that neighbours can work together to solve local problems.

Using survey data, the Vancouver Foundation identified drivers of change: two pathways to help people become more connected and engaged:

- **A bridging pathway**—strengthening bridges between groups, for example, between people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- **A bonding pathway**—strengthening the bonds within groups, for example, between neighbours.

At the base of the bridging pathway is Freedom from Discrimination, whether that is based on ethnicity or age, or one’s economic situation, appearance or disability status. Feeling discriminated against is the key barrier—the first door that must be opened—before people can feel a part of their neighbourhood and community.

Freedom from discrimination fosters a stronger sense of belonging. That leads to more trust, a greater ease in forging relationships and connecting across boundaries such as ethnicity, more care about the welfare of neighbours, and a greater sense of personal obligation to improve neighbourhoods and community.

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1 There are currently 110 “ethnic enclaves” (30% of population is a visible minority) found in metro Vancouver. This is more than in any other major Canadian region. Many of these enclaves are predominantly Chinese. By 2030, Statistics Canada predicts that Chinese will be the largest visible minority group in Vancouver.
At the base of the bonding pathway is Conversations with Neighbours. Interactions—more than just a wave or casual hello—have a direct impact on trust. When we trust our neighbours we become committed to acting in their best interests. We take collective steps to make the neighbourhood and community a better place to live — for everyone. We care and get involved.

Read the reports — especially Small Steps to Big Change — at http://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage/2012survey.htm

Roundtable Dialogue 1:
Strategies for addressing isolation and building connectivity.
What’s worked and what hasn’t?

Challenges raised earlier were reviewed, including: pace of growth, diversity, generational differences (expectations), condo dwellers, inequality of voices heard, and political disengagement.

The representatives were asked (1) "what have you tried, but hasn’t worked yet?” in response, several representatives revealed that they have tried to get individuals who are not from the dominant culture to engage with the community and decision-making (some mentioned Indo-Canadians in particular), but have had little success.

Building on the above, representatives were asked, (2) what has worked to get people to engage and attend meetings? Responses included:
- Free food and swag
- Making them angry
- Shifting the venue and time
to them instead of bringing them to us (e.g. host at a school)
- engage the family by hosting events at schools and ensuring meetings are at family-friendly times (bearing in mind that youth are often more likely to speak English)
- Letting people know there will be translators present (simultaneous translation)—but this is difficult (what language do you choose to provide translations in?)
- NOT providing information in the languages of the communities you’re trying to attract (may seem counter-intuitive)
- Take the “city-speak” out of what we’re communicating

It was also pointed out that we should consider whether we are talking about engaging people for our benefit (e.g. input into our civic processes) or for their benefit, which citizens may define differently (e.g. engaging to build greater connections among neighbours or helping newcomers feel more welcomed).

Finally the question of interculturalism was raised, i.e. how do you foster communication and understanding across diverse cultures? Responses included:
- Perhaps we should not continually accommodate people’s native languages, as this can have the negative effect of contributing to enclaves and isolation;
- Maybe we should be teaching English speakers (students, young people) basic phrases and greetings in other languages;
- Hosting the Fusion Festival featuring educational and cultural pieces with the goal of having participants experience each other’s cultures and break down barriers.

At this point in the meeting, representatives were asked to share concrete examples of strategies tried in their communities related to youth disconnection, intercultural/ethnocultural integration, building connections within neighbourhoods, political engagement, physical health, and socio-economic isolation. Examples are summarized on the following page.

See also Dave Meslin’s Ted talk (Antidote to Apathy) highlighting how municipalities make it structurally difficult for people to engage.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Intercultural / Ethnocultural</th>
<th>Neighbourhood Connections</th>
<th>Political Engagement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active youth group that participates in running community events</td>
<td>Welcome B.C. New Immigrants into the city</td>
<td>Engage BIA's</td>
<td>Open public presentation in council meetings</td>
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<td>Combine youth and seniors – mentors</td>
<td>Two day diversity festival</td>
<td>Little free library project; neighbourhood run initiative, village funds to support</td>
<td>Robust elections, outreach with language support</td>
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<td>Once a week youth and seniors cook dinner together for a community meal</td>
<td>Fusion Fest with country representatives, education, cultural, music</td>
<td>Hot Summer Night Street Party Kit, the fire department will attend street parties to educate residents and allow kids to play with fire trucks</td>
<td>Extensive OCP community engagement process</td>
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<td>Pizza night (paid by city) at youth centres where young people feedback to the city + annual banquet to recognize their contribution</td>
<td>Support Persian events</td>
<td>Committees setup for each area of the city Street poetry</td>
<td>Webcast all council meetings/ hearings</td>
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<td>Active youth advisory committee with members from every secondary school</td>
<td>Multicultural Festivals: Dragon Boat Festival, Vancouver International Soccer Festival, DesiFEST.</td>
<td>Community Gardens encourages dialogue between residents often involving varied ethnic, multi-generational, and social-economic groups</td>
<td>Include all ages and cultures in committee appointments</td>
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<td>Special programs at boys + girls clubs—integrated teams</td>
<td>Encourage attendance at cultural festivals</td>
<td>Block Parties</td>
<td>Working groups on major policy initiatives</td>
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<td>Re-instituting police-youth liaison officers</td>
<td>“Taste of Ambleside, Dundarave, Horseshoe Bay” where merchants offer food and gifts to ticket holders</td>
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<td>Offering assistance to community associations getting their name publicized by inclusion in city brochures and on our websites</td>
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<td>Youth services implementation group</td>
<td>New cool youth room at the library</td>
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<td>Providing all municipal candidates a 200-word statement on city website</td>
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<td>Harmony arts festival music for youth</td>
<td>History tour</td>
<td>Online “Town Halls”</td>
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<td>Inviting high school students to assist in developing / improving our city website to make it more youth friendly and relevant</td>
<td>Neighbourhood enhancement projects</td>
<td>Community liaison committee</td>
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<td>Citizen U and Youth Politik engaging youth in City Hall</td>
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<td>Advisory groups to council</td>
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<td>Programs to engage “at risk” kids doing what they like: paintball, laser-tag, bowling, pizza nights; new programs for girls</td>
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<td>Youth engagement facilitated program heavily using social engagement. Practices to encourage multiculturalism and anti-racism</td>
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<td>Recreation programs with schools, delivered in schools, after school</td>
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<td><strong>Physical Health</strong></td>
<td><strong>Socio-economic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Seniors/ Intergenerational</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete trail system</td>
<td>Community Gardens and Urban Farms that include low income residents</td>
<td>Senior Forums: Senior abuse, accessibility, isolation</td>
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<td>Invest heavily in indoor and outdoor walking and riding trails; invest in recreational infrastructure</td>
<td>Built three second stage housing units within walking distance</td>
<td>Senior advisory board that directs all senior programs including community dinners or a pool tournament</td>
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<td>Program to make our city the most physically active partnership between: City, Fraser Health, Peace Arch Hospital and Community Health Foundation and social service network known as “sources”</td>
<td>‘serving the poor:’ More than ten agencies (e.g. Neighbourhood House) in community owned facilities development through amenity bonuses in new construction (Y2 market rent)</td>
<td>Pairing school classes with seniors’ centre; encourage seniors in classrooms for special occasions such as Remembrance Day</td>
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<td>Encourage more walking use of urban forest trails</td>
<td>Community Festivals and encouraging ‘places of interest,’ where singles and families can enjoy a ‘meeting place’</td>
<td>Senior centres integrated with other facilities so there is a cross-fertilization between library/pools/rec centres</td>
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<td>Saturday morning 'Mayors Walk,' different park each week</td>
<td>Firefighters delivery lunch/snack programs</td>
<td>“Municipal Pages” in local newspapers advertising council meeting/committee meeting</td>
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<td>Family Programs through Grants for Needy</td>
<td>Low barrier shelters</td>
<td>‘Snow Angels,’ Youth doing snow removal for, and “checking”, on seniors and “shut-ins”</td>
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<td>Soccer games with all countries represented and refugee kids</td>
<td>Support for ‘Meals on Wheels’</td>
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<td>Lengthening the waterfront promenade to encourage more walking</td>
<td>Community non-profits are financially supported. I.e. Deltassist, Versa, identify and bring together those in need; recommend actions to council</td>
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<td>Paved track that is free and open to the public to walk/run/race.</td>
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<td>Significant investment in recreation center facilities and programs- for all ages</td>
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<td>Building/constructing walking trails, connecting green space, rowing facilities</td>
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<td>Free gym space for community groups (volleyball, soccer, yoga)</td>
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<td>No recreation services, so we encourage volunteers to start up their own programs</td>
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<td>Free community centre entrance for the first Saturday in June</td>
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Roundtable Dialogue 2: Understanding the Vancouver Foundation’s study

Attendees were asked what they would like to know more about, i.e. if they have any questions for the Vancouver Foundation related to their study, or advice for either the Vancouver Foundation or Simon Fraser University for future research and engagement.

The question of whether there was any relationship between variables such as age or culture and personal feelings of how much we have to contribute was raised. The Vancouver Foundation responded by pointing to a more detailed analysis of this question, included in the mini report (provided): When We Feel We Have Nothing to Offer (www.vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage/2012survey.htm). The report shows that 25 to 34-year-olds, women, and people with higher levels of education and income are more likely to say they have little to offer.

Another representative questioned how to gauge the study’s relevance, given that some of the figures and statistics are not commensurate with common sense or experience, e.g. the study suggests that voting habits are higher than they actually are. The Vancouver Foundation responded, indicating that certain inconsistencies are attributable to self-reporting bias; people tend to exaggerate when self-reporting voting habits. They assured the group that the findings are all statistically reliable, and highlighted that the most significant finding of the study was a trend of lower participation in the kinds of activities that matter in terms of our connections and trust.

There was also a question of how much the issue of isolation relates to fear. The Vancouver Foundation’s representative responded by conceding that this was not captured by the study. The focus of the research was engagement at the micro level (individual), in neighbourhoods, and in communities. It is an interesting question for further research to determine what we can do to get people to overcome fears and get out and into the streets (e.g. children playing, people taking walks).

In terms of advice, one representative suggested that the Vancouver Foundation should look at similar surveys conducted in other cities, and/or at other times, to benchmark and compare, and ultimately help develop solutions. It was also suggested that religion might be another avenue for investigation, i.e. the relationship between adherence to a religious faith and/or regularly attending a religious service and feelings of isolation; the thought being that religious communities may provide a source of connection.

Finally, a representative requested that more rigorous research and engagement be conducted to promote involvement and connections among younger age groups (particularly the 25–34 age bracket that was highlighted in the Vancouver Foundation’s report).

Final Round: Feedback

The representatives were asked: (a) has this been a useful discussion for you; and, (b) what’s one idea you’ll bring back to your municipality?

A poll of responses is outlined below:

Has this been a useful discussion for you?
- It’s been useful to have more time to sit with this information. In our jobs we don’t get time to chew on the depth of this kind of work. To be forced to reckon with this information and what others are doing in their regions. However, I do worry that we’re not looking at it from the positive perspective (70% of people are connecting)… if we approach from a more positive frame (aspiration) we might be able to move people in a more positive direction
- I would love to see a session where we can delve more deeply into the question of how we can best communicate with / involve recent immigrant Canadians.
- We should be doing this again but at a higher level and with more structure (e.g. as Metro Vancouver Board).
- It’s been beneficial to think about connections outside of the core group (tax payers)
- I would love to see this information longitudinally. It’s important to understand different groups’ (cultural) concerns and review what our community is doing well.
- Appreciate SFU living out its commitment to be a more engaged university (getting off of the hill). I think it would have been even more worthwhile to hear more about solutions. The research kind of reinforces what we see all the time. I would like to hear solutions from, not just other Metro-Van representatives, but from other jurisdictions where good things are happening.
- This conversation has opened my mind to ideas that other people have, on a personal level. Also appreciate that this survey has been done, it will make me think about these issues moving forward.
- I think we should remember that we’re
running successful cities, and right now we’re reaching out to make them even better.
- The study provides a baseline so if we do it again in the future, we can see if it’s trending. I will think about this as we move forward with existing plans, and would like to see the issue of safety explored more.
- I found today very useful: shining a light on a fundamental aspect that contributes to human happiness. Anything we can do to move in that direction is good. It’s also interesting to know how some of the conveniences of our everyday lives have contributed to our isolation.
- It’s nice to be spending this much time talking about this issue. The data validates / substantiates a lot of what I’ve already thought / suspected. Facilitating this and giving us this data is a huge start.
- I appreciate the opportunity to think about this and am looking forward to receiving consolidation of comments. I would like to see these things drilled down further and would have liked to discuss the effect of commuting on participation (if you’re driving for hours a day, you’re less likely to interact with someone when you get home)
- This was a wonderful opportunity to blue sky on a focused topic. Talk big ideas. A chance to think about the changing dynamic of the democratic process (archaic laws that don’t relate to our community) I would like to learn more.

What’s one idea you’ll bring back to your municipality?
- Collectively there’s lots of good things being done—think we should mix and match and steal each other’s ideas more readily.
- I loved the idea of youth and senior dinners, and of reaching in and getting more engagement outside of the core group that always shows up at meetings.
- I’m going to take away some of these ideas and bring them back to my staff, to share and use as a tool.
- I’m interested in getting a transcript of all of the ideas.

Closing Comments

The Vancouver Foundation explained that their research started out of a desire to have a greater impact with their granting. Prior to doing the survey, they talked to over 100 community leaders about the biggest issues facing municipalities, and were surprised when disconnection emerged as a real and pressing problem (ahead of others).

Nowhere else in Canada has this sort of survey been conducted. In 3–4 years the Vancouver Foundation plans to do this survey a second time, and gain a better understanding of progress and trends. They are keen to work with representatives (like those who attended this meeting) to find solutions and make a difference.

Simon Fraser University representatives explained that this theme was taken on after deciding to become a more engaged university. The idea was to shine a light on a problem, but also bring people together to come up with solutions. The Alone Together Community Summit has really been about the “together” aspect of Alone Together. Among the representatives who attended this meeting, there’s a real opportunity to come up with best practices. The university feels it’s important not to focus on the negative but look at what works and make that the model; enlarge this conversation and work together to solve these problems. The community summit also highlighted that there are other individuals and organizations that can be key in helping to address this issue. Whether its consciousness raising or leveraging the strengths of existing organizations, there is a great deal of potential. SFU pledges to continue reflecting on how it can continue leveraging its strengths as a university to be an agent for change and creating connections.

Finally, SFU invited the representatives at the meeting to utilize its academic resources in tackling this problem. If there are points for greater knowledge generation or areas of further research, Mayors are invited to seek support from, and provide guidance to the university.