

Imagine Abbotsford

Report on Session 2: Public Dialogue

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on behalf of the Imagine Abbotsford Steering Committee.

“We need to learn about and understand ourselves in order to interconnect to others.”

On January 26th, 2008, Imagine Abbotsford convened a public dialogue to consider Abbotsford’s future with regard to issues of culture and education thirty years from now. An open invitation was extended to all residents of Abbotsford to participate in this dialogue, which was held at Cascade Community Church. A dedicated group of citizens from a variety of backgrounds braved the forecast of snow to participate in this year’s public dialogue.

As a continuation of the first round of dialogues that convened in 2006 to 2007 in order to discuss issues of ecology and economy, this second round of dialogues commenced with the “Thought Leaders” dialogue, which drew together 25 community leaders in September 2007, to engage, explore and share ideas about Abbotsford’s cultural and educational future. The *Imagine Abbotsford Consensus Report** is the official record of the Thought Leaders Dialogue.

The purpose of the public dialogue was to build and expand upon the *Imagine Abbotsford Consensus Report* with the following intentions:

1. Create interpersonal connections across the diversities of Abbotsford: age, gender, students, workers, employers, ethnicity, race, etc.
2. Create connections between people’s perspectives of culture and education.
3. Discover common ground to build on, and respect differences that make a difference.
4. Imagine how, over the course of thirty years, we can improve the quality of Abbotsford’s learning and culture in a way that is supportive for all.

* For the full report visit: <http://www.sfu.ca/dialogue/imaginebc/pdf/ImagineAbbotsfordTL.pdf>

The context of the dialogue was set up with presentations from four of the Thought Leaders who participated in the creation of the *Imagine Abbotsford Consensus Report*.

Don Chapman, from University College of the Fraser Valley encouraged the participants to think less about “education” in its formal context and more about “learning” as a life-long process. He encouraged the participants to think of a collective community story with each of us as the authors of our own lives. He stated,

“There is a collective community story with an on-going narrative. The story continues to be written and we have the chance to influence the collective narrative.”

Lee Murray from the Abbotsford Arts Council and the Abbotsford Downtown Business Association reminded attendees that our city is full of many art and cultural groups. According to Murray, 46 member groups and over 6000 artisans are represented by the Abbotsford Arts Council. He expressed his concern with the lack of visibility of these groups and artists within the community,

“No one knows what’s going on! We’ve got great artists – Let’s show it off.”

Baljit Dhaliwal, a Mission School District educator who recently worked on a multicultural dissertation spoke of the concept of cultural intelligence. She relayed,

“There is a connection between identity and a sense of belonging. Everyone needs to have a sense of belonging. Multiculturalism is a coming together of people from different parts of the world to share a sense of living together.”

According to Baljit, there exists an opportunity to embrace the diversity of our community and in so doing, to create a stronger sense of belonging for all of our citizens.

Satwinder Bains, the Director of Indo-Canadian Studies at University College of the Fraser Valley spoke of the current and future state of affairs of the Indo-

Canadian community in Abbotsford. According to Satwinder, the Indo-Canadian community, which has persevered for over 100 years in this geographical area, is enjoying a healthy state of being. In contrast to the media's sensational and negative reporting, she feels that the Indo-Canadian community has many success stories and contributes to Abbotsford's overall prosperity. In her opinion, a rewriting of Canadian history that reflects the contributions of all cultural groups including Indo-Canadians is required to develop a strong cultural future.

"If we have good relationships amongst each other, we can handle a little discord."

After receiving brief a reminder on how to conduct a dialogue, participants were encouraged to form groups of eight to discuss issues of culture and education, framed by the following questions:

- How would a good quality of life in Abbotsford look to you in the next thirty years?
- What learning and cultural aspirations will matter to your children or grandchildren in Abbotsford?
- What are the burning questions about the role of learning and culture in Abbotsford's future?

At the end of this breakout session, participants rejoined the larger group for a plenary "fish bowl" discussion. The room was rearranged into a series of concentric circles, with a small circle of six chairs in the middle. People were asked to join the centre circle to share their thoughts with the larger group on the following questions:

- Imagine yourself thirty years from now, talking to the next generation – what will you tell them about how you / we approached these burning questions?
- What would you tell policy makers we should do now?
- In the next year, what is one step you will take to move from contemplation to action regarding these questions?

Six themes were drawn from an analysis of the notes taken from the break-out groups, the plenary “fish bowl” discussion and the “burning questions.”

These six interrelated themes are as follows:

1. Culture as Heritage
2. Culture as Artistic Expression and Experience
3. Physical Infrastructure
4. Education
5. Sustainability
6. Wish List

“Great culture is a crystallization of current minds made to last.”

1. Culture as Heritage

For the purpose of dialogue, two primary uses of the word “culture” emerged: culture as heritage, and culture as a manifestation of the arts. Although the terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive, during the dialogue different sets of ideas emerged from this naturally occurring classification.

In the dialogue, culture as heritage took the form of acknowledging the various ethnic and religious backgrounds that comprise the population of Abbotsford. Culture in this regard is the set of social systems, norms, values and traditions that give people a sense of who they are and how they belong in a community. As one participant stated so eloquently,

“Culture is how we live within a larger society – It is what we learn through our relationships with family, parents, neighbours, etc.”

Cultural heritage is in constant flux – and many comments in the dialogue reflected the struggle to find a balance between cultural inclusion, cultural understanding and cross-cultural participation amongst all residents of Abbotsford.

The dialogue identified challenges that a city such as ours with a strong sub-set of cultural identities experience. Most notable of these challenges was the difficulty in overcoming a sense of “us versus them” mentality. As one participant stated,

“We need to develop a feeling of heritage and togetherness. Support for community relies on each person. Adjoining feelings of multicultural and civic responsibility will create a ‘we are related’ atmosphere that will open doors and break down the barriers to inclusion.”

Some participants in the dialogue spoke of their hope that overcoming the “us versus them” mentality amongst different cultural groups would lead to collective problem solving – that when there is a crisis in one community within Abbotsford, all communities will take ownership becoming allies not enemies.

2. Culture as Artistic Expression and Experience

Culture as an expression of artistic endeavor was considered to be an important part of creating a sophisticated Abbotsford. Art was articulated as the physical manifestation of who we are and what we value. Participants relayed their appreciation of other cities that fostered a sense of culture through art, and wished that Abbotsford’s untapped potential could be realized.

“How do we support our children to embrace and support the creativity of the arts?”

There was a sense that Abbotsford has an abundance of artists from many disciplines – musicians, painters, sculptors, and various artisans. Lacking are the opportunities for artists to “come out of their hiding place” and showcase their talents for the community at large.

3. Physical Infrastructure

At the heart of the issue of Abbotsford’s unrealized cultural and artistic potential was a generally acknowledged lack of physical infrastructure in our city to accommodate related endeavors. The dialogue brought attention to the relationship between the physical infrastructure of our community and the way it shapes the quality and frequency of meaningful social interaction. In other words, quality of life is a direct outcome of the venues, meeting places, shopping districts, parks and public spaces where lives are lived.

Four elements of Abbotsford’s physical infrastructure emerged during the dialogue – mobility / transportation issues, aesthetic appeal, venues (or lack thereof) and the concept of a “third place.”

Mobility / Transportation.

Looking thirty years forward into Abbotsford's future, mobility and transportation are key elements of building a healthy community. One participant envisioned a future where citizens could easily ride their bikes to train stations that connect to other cities like Vancouver and Chilliwack. Another participant envisioned herself thirty years older and requiring a safe condo residence that offered easy access to public transportation. Several citizens expressed their desire for a pedestrian-only downtown core that can be easily accessed by bike or transit. There was a general consensus that getting out of our cars and using bike trails, sidewalks and public transit offers advantages in terms of both quality of life and sustainability.

Aesthetic Appeal

Participants in the dialogue hoped that Abbotsford's future was aesthetically pleasing. One participant spoke of "luring future generations out of their homes with intriguing architecture and compelling sites." There was a general appreciation that creating a beautiful and interesting city was of fundamental importance to Abbotsford's current and future appeal.

"How do we balance village warmth with city sophistication (particular cultural traditions with universal appreciation?)"

Venues

Life is lived in physical places. Public life and an appreciation of culture as both heritage and the arts require venues. Many participants expressed a desire to see a larger variety of venues for the performing and visual arts. Other participants spoke of the need for a large cultural centre where culture is explored and dialogue takes place amongst different groups. These venues were perceived as the responsibility of policy makers to foster, but also as potential business ventures for enterprising entrepreneurs.

Libraries and museums were spoken of as a potential place for people to come together to share ideas and support learning in our community. As stated by one dialogue group,

"Through libraries we can create a culture of lifelong learning. They can be gathering places, reflective of

community and local governance. A place to study, learn and talk.”

Many residents also suggested using closed schools as community centres.

A Third Place

Many participants spoke of the need for a physical place that welcomes all citizens regardless of age, ethnicity, or religion, a place where social inclusion and meaningful interaction can occur. One participant eloquently captured this desire in his notion of a “third place.” On a trip to another community in Washington State, he discovered a public space referred to as the “third place” – not home, not work, but somewhere else. He explained it as,

“A third place is a social space that incorporates elements of a library, bookstore, gallery and meeting place. It is an alternative notion of a cultural centre. A public space to go and think and be creative in downtime. It is a place for inspiration. It is a place for all cultures to merge and share their stories.”

The relationship between Abbotsford’s physical infrastructure and social infrastructure became evident as the dialogue progressed - that isolation is a direct outcome of the way we develop our physical landscape. Looking ahead at Abbotsford’s future we have the potential to create a city that values personal inter-face and fosters cross-sectoral participation in meaningful ways.

4. Education

“There is an importance in integrating culture and learning. We don’t have to think of art and learning as separate entities. They are both manifestations of the way we care.”

Dialogue on education resulted in numerous statements of values about what we want our educational system to become. Focus in the dialogue centered around two primary themes – education as lifelong learning, and education as a means of teaching children how to be productive citizens of our community.

“What should we do now to ensure a strong role of learning and culture in the future?”

Many participants reflected on the need for more after school learning and cultural programs. Likewise, it was suggested that the educational system must promote a broad-based, encompassing and objective view of world religions and cultures. Children’s perspectives should be broadened by fostering the opportunity to explore many things in the world. Flexibility and opportunity are required to provide a more holistic education.

“Children should be encouraged to find their individual voice.”

Libraries were once again promoted as a means of obtaining both cultural and life-long learning experiences. One participant expressed a need for our libraries to be governed locally, in order to be more effective and meet the needs of our unique community.

Finally, a local politician suggested that school boards be eliminated or amalgamated with city council. His rationale was as follows,

“The primary role of school boards has become choosing which schools to close. This is the dirty work of the province. The usefulness of school boards needs to be re-evaluated.”

5. Sustainability

Imagining Abbotsford thirty years in the future led some participants to reflect on issues of sustainability. Like last year’s dialogues, the importance of protecting farms and natural spaces is a relevant issue. One participant expressed concern about fuel supplies and their effect on suburban life. The issue of transportation and the high environmental costs of our car-driven community were once again, brought to the surface of awareness.

7. The Wish List

This list is a collection of elements that participants in the dialogue would like to see in Abbotsford.

- Pedestrian-friendly downtown core and shopping district.

- A healthy blend of multiculturalism and urban living on South Fraser Way like Commercial Drive in Vancouver.
- Improved social services for new international residents.
- A café district that supports the arts.
- Multiple ways to show off the arts – commercial galleries, public spaces, public galleries, commercial exhibits.
- Effective education about and advertising the promotion of the arts.
- Create a “third place.”
- Turn closed schools into community centres.
- Free museums for students.
- Good quality facilities for children and youth.
- Lots of activities and attractions to keep youth from choosing negative alternatives.
- More programs for early childhood.
- Free public bicycles scattered throughout the city for general use (like European model.)
- Naturalist club.
- Cultural tourism.
- Public space for youth to create their own culture.

Conclusion

Imagining Abbotsford’s future in regard to culture and education provides the opportunity to celebrate our potential and plan for probable challenges. Residents who participated in the community dialogue produced a rich and complex picture of the social realities that affect quality of life, now and in the future.

Action must be taken by policy makers and individuals to achieve an enviable future. Participants expressed a desire for policy makers to read, reflect, and act on Imagine Abbotsford’s dialogues. One participant reflected on the importance of individual actions,

“The irony of the burning questions is that we don’t have the burning answers. We need to acknowledge the importance of individual action rather than relying on the government. Culture will be embraced through our own actions. We live in a revolutionary culture. We don’t need to re-vamp on a large scale – we need to think about what we as individuals can do on a small scale.”

Individuals working together with policy makers have the opportunity to make Abbotsford's future bright and enviable. The rich diversity of both our cultural heritage and artistic expression in conjunction with the many opportunities to pursue lifelong learning will play a prominent role in creating a future that is socially inclusive and of benefit to all citizens of Abbotsford.

Side Bars – Rick's Pod Roving

PICKING UP IMAGINE ABBOTSFORD DISCUSSIONS WHILE ROVING FROM POD TO POD:

In defining a good quality of life for Abbotsford, a woman from Langley said she first had to understand more about who is here and why. She thought cheaper housing in Abbotsford was bringing new people, but the tradeoff was hours of commuting to their jobs in centres like Vancouver."

"I live in Langley, but when I purchase a home it will be in Abbotsford," she said. "But I have come very aware of transit in observing this community." Others in her pod agreed that quality of life improves if people have accessible areas where they can interact with others.

A member of the group who attended a neighbourhood association meeting said some of the talk there was centered on building "villages" in different areas of the community where neighbours can go and support each other, to understand one another, or offer information and assistance. "It doesn't have to be a building, it could be a city park or a plaza," she commented, stressing the importance of human connections and relationships.

* * *

Gathering places, whether they are labeled as cross-cultural or not, were again heralded in a second Imagine Abbotsford pod where members agreed "if we just have places then culture happens. You don't have to label it.

Culture comes out of dialogue . . . just like at a hockey rink."

In talking about entry points to learning, a pod member shared her story about reading a powerful book (Five Frames of Mind for the Future) by multiple intelligence author Howie Gardner.

"These are the five mindsets we need to equip our kids for the future," she said: disciplinary mind (skills); synthesizing mind because our world is becoming "more flat" and we need to operate globally across many fields; creative mind to navigate the new; respective mind because dialogue happens in a respectful environment; and ethical mind. "The message is profound."

* * *

Upon discovering the Arty Awards in Abbotsford, a pod member shared her experience about being surprised by how wonderful and well thought-out it was. "The performances were excellent . . . far more people should be attending this annual event or should know about it."

She said the awards program showed how committed people are to helping Abbotsford become more culturally known.

With those words, a member of the Abbotsford Arts Council who just happened to have a supply of Arty Awards nomination forms, happily handed them out to his animated group.

* * *

Asked about sharing a learning or cultural experience in Abbotsford, a pod member reflected on a day as an Abbotsford Community Services teacher taking a classroom of 15 students with roots from around the world on a local tour.

The students were learning to read and write English for the first time.

"We did a Christmas lights field trip after practicing our vocabulary for some time. I had students from Sudan, Paraguay, China and elsewhere . . . most who don't drive. They were very excited."

When the tour group rolled up to different sites, people who saw the students thought the delegation was visiting Canada.

"Little did they know that some of these students are raising family in Abbotsford and have been working here for years. Their kids go to our schools."

"When the students saw the lights and glitter . . . it was like Disneyland."

"It suggested to me there is not a lot of opportunity for people to be exposed to multiculturalism here."

* * *

Referring to the Italian community that arrived in Vancouver in the 1930s and 1940s, one pod member described it as an enclave of a cultural community frozen in time. "When their grandchildren went back to Italy, there wasn't the same culture. We have to be really careful about saying we are conserving our culture. Back in India, Africa and the Sudan, they are evolving and changing too."

My grandfather came here from Norway in the 1920s. Norway now isn't what it was in the 1920s."

"We should look at every human being and see the face of God in his face... and then it doesn't matter."

Side Bar – Personal Commitments

During the Plenary "Fish Bowl" discussion, participants were asked to share one thing that they would do over the next year to move from contemplation to action. Responses included:

- Go to Council meetings.
 - Volunteer for initiatives that are close to the heart.
 - Organize faith communities.
 - Learn to make butter chicken.
 - Take an interest in the city's newcomers and their needs.
 - Form new friendships.
 - Become a policy maker.
 - Promote Abbotsford as a destination for residents of other towns.
 - Make the voice of new immigrants audible.
 - Learn my neighbour's name.
 - Integrate ideas of community into the business world.
 - Run for office.
 - Drive 6 year old daughter to art lessons.
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Side Bar: Acknowledgments

Public Session Presenters

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Don Chapman

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