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Sustainability summit offers view of a green, prosperous Cleveland

3-day event fuels new energy, ideas among participants

Saturday, August 15, 2009

John Funk

Plain Dealer Reporter

For three days this week, 700 Greater Clevelanders learned how sustainability is paying off for corporations that have adopted its principles -- and what it could mean to Northeast Ohio's economic future if it becomes part of our everyday culture over the next decade.

And they heard sobering lectures from experts about the consequences of continuing with business as usual as the world's population increases, the competition for resources intensifies and prices soar.

The summit wrap-up Friday on the floor of Public Hall at the Cleveland Convention Center was as joyful as a tent revival. And as much work as a tough political convention where no candidate had all the votes going in. It was a day like no other for many of the people who stuck it out to the final hour.

"I haven't had a day like this since my wedding day," one participant told the crowd on an open microphone and television camera where dozens of people expressed their feelings. Some said they thought they were experiencing an alternate Cleveland, one full of hope. And from the flurry of business cards being exchanged, it appeared that there will be a lot of new connections.

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Creative exercise to come up with ideas stirs sustainability summit participants

Grueling creative exercise stirs participants at Public Hall

Friday, August 14, 2009

John Funk

Plain Dealer Reporter

Today is D-Day for Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson's sustainability summit - the creative three-day gathering of more than 700 people from across the region grappling with how to move Northeast Ohio's economy toward sustainable practices.

David Cooperrider, a professor at the Weatherhead School of Business at Case Western Reserve University and the developer of the dynamic interactions used in the conference, said he expects concrete proposals before the summit ends this afternoon.

"This group is amazing," he said Thursday, an eventful day that included outbursts of exuberant enthusiasm from the crowd as well as grueling hard work in small teams.

"There is enough innovation happening in the city that people were just waiting for the opportunity to come together," he said to explain the superhigh energy.

That energy exploded in a friendly competition earlier in the day when Cooperrider asked for the first reports from the nearly 90 teams that he had organized on the floor of Public Hall at the Cleveland Convention Center.

Several dozen of the teams leaped from their chairs in fiercely enthusiastic bids for a spot on the stage to present their ideas of what Greater Cleveland should look like by 2019 with a cultural and manufacturing shift to sustainability.

Unlike participants in any of the more than 500 such conferences Cooperrider has organized, no team in this group chose to present its ideas with a lecture. "I told them it could be creative," Cooperrider said.

And it was. It looked a bit like the race to be on "American Idol."

Among the 25 teams that stormed the stage, one group formed an octet to sing about the death of Oscar the Grouch in a bucolic and happy Cleveland just a decade away.

The singers broke into a refrain from "Celebration" by Kool and the Gang, a wild rendition that brought applause.

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Grueling creative exercise stirs participants at Public Hall

Another group, using rudimentary art materials provided by summit organizers, jumped onto the stage paddling a huge paper boat, "The Best Time 2019."

It was more than a good time, though. The teams may have used skits and some very talented singing to paint the picture of the changes they were dreaming about. But they also submitted their ideas in written form.

And by early afternoon, Cooperrider was distilling the suggestions into broad categories -- local food production, advanced manufacturing, transportation, advanced energy production, health and education issues, water use and dozens of others.

"I didn't realize how in-depth this could go, this brainstorming phase," Cooperrider told them. After describing some of the suggestions, he pointed to the broad categories his assistants had written on 8-foot-by-4-foot poster boards mounted around the floor.

That's when the "foot voting" began. At Cooperrider's signal, masses of people ran all over the floor, ending up in the groups covering the topics they were most interested in.

Dragging chairs into makeshift huddles, team members could be seen jumping up like excited teens with their ideas on sticky notes. The team leaders posted them on the boards. Discussion then ensued and the ideas were whittled down, polished, re-invented for the next hour or so.

The process was crucial, said Cooperrider, the second step in the four-step "Appreciative Inquiry" process he has developed over decades. The steps: "Discovery, Dream, Design and Deploy" are designed to build on the strengths that the participants bring to the summit.

Whatever comes of the final proposals, many participants said they were making connections with people and companies they intended to keep and develop.

The city is planning to create a commission-like group to keep track of what happens to the 10 to 15 concrete, detailed plans that are expected to emerge today.

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