

Tradition of civic engagement continues with PlaceSpeak start-up

Justen Harcourt, Yuri Artibise and Colleen Hardwick have famous names in urban planning circles

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 26, 2012



Ward Perrin/PNG

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

METRO VANCOUVER -- Their fathers helped shape Metro Vancouver as it is today, but Justen Harcourt, Yuri Artibise and Colleen Hardwick hope to have a hand in influencing the region of the future.

The trio are involved in PlaceSpeak, a new start-up that provides a virtual consultation forum — or, as Harcourt suggests, “civic engagement for the new generation.”

Through the click of a mouse, citizens can be connected online with local issues in their specific neighbourhoods.

“The bar is sitting pretty high to engage the public in planning,” Artibise said. “[With PlaceSpeak] you can learn a bit more in the privacy of your own home and voice your opinions without feeling intimidated.”

None of the three knew each other before the birth of PlaceSpeak, which arose out of a plan by Hardwick to replicate two regional surveys from 1973 and 1990 with an Urban Futures Opinion Survey 2012.

Hardwick maintains she was “indoctrinated at a young age” by her late father Walter, who had a hand in shaping the region and such iconic areas as False Creek, through his dinner table conversations and his work in civic and provincial politics.

As a youngster, she even helped him collate the results of that first survey in 1973. As a young adult, she studied urban planning.

She concedes she got sidetracked into a career in the film industry, but her passion for planning has since be reignited; her latest venture inspired as a “personal homage” to her father who died in 2005.

Hardwick started her quest by reaching out to former B.C. premier Mike Harcourt, who was involved with her father in the fight against allowing freeways through Chinatown.

Harcourt, in turn, suggested she contact Justen, a planning consultant with Colliers. “He said you need to speak with my kid,” Justen Harcourt said.

Harcourt, who shares his father’s passion for urban planning but not for politics, met Hardwick for

coffee. "We became the first two investors," he said. Hardwick is the CEO of the start-up, while Mike Harcourt is chairman.

"This is a real game changer," said Harcourt, who prefers to take an entrepreneurial, private sector approach. "You just have to look at how far the idea has come in the past year and a half.

"We're getting a lot of traction on this. People immediately understand when we say we're trying to improve civic engagement and the democratic process."

The process is simple: Residents must register with PlaceSpeak, and link their identity to their address to ensure they can be verified. Once they do, they can participate in any municipal consultations, such as master transportation plans, that arise.

They can also participate in the 22-minute 2012 survey, at www.placespeak.com/urbanfuturessurvey.

Hardwick acknowledges this survey is different: it's not being done by the regional district and it involves a generation that doesn't bother with telephone landlines, and communicates through social media, email or mobile phones.

Artibise, director of community engagement for PlaceSpeak, argues it's a much-needed platform for the new generation and also allows renters — and not just homeowners — a chance to have their say. It is appealing to residents aged 35 to 45, he said, when it's hard to get people to public meetings or involved in consultation because they are busy with jobs and families. Plus, he said, three minutes behind a microphone at a public hearing isn't really consultation.

"My friends are interested but they don't have time to watch or read the news," Artibise said, adding it also appeals to all residents, not just homeowners. "A lot of people rent and don't get notices (on rezonings). Once you get involved in one issue you can be involved in others.

"For me what was interesting was blending social media with urban planning."

Unlike Harcourt and Hardwick, Artibise, didn't have a lifelong interest in urban planning despite the fact his father Alan wielded considerable influence in the city's planning circles as a former professor and director of University of B.C.'s school of planning.

Artibise, who studied political science and public administration, said he initially "ran away from urban planning," and only got involved after he moved to Phoenix, Arizona. "It was the first time I went into a city that hadn't been planned well," he said. "Growing up in Victoria and Vancouver, and living in Ottawa, I took (good planning) for granted."

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