

## March 23 Council Community Forum Summary

On March 23, the City Council held its first community forum of 2026. The Council welcomed 71 community members in the City Hall lobby and Aspen Room to discuss how our community is working to create a Vancouver for All. Participants included community and neighborhood leaders, social service providers, longtime volunteers and staff and students from the Foundation's youth program, which serves students in middle school and high school. Each table included a mix of community members, City Councilors, City staff and independent facilitators from Vancouver engagement consultant PointNorth. Mayor Anne McEnerny-Ogle circulated between conversations.

Across seven tables, facilitators invited community members to discuss three main questions:

- What makes you feel connected to our community?
- What barriers might prevent some residents from fully benefitting from the opportunities that our community offers — such as jobs, education, parks or community programs?
- How can we improve belonging for people of all ages, backgrounds and income levels?

### Key Discussion Themes

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#### **Question #1: What makes you feel connected to our community?**

Participants discussed a wide range of factors, which help them feel connected to the community. Many described the feeling of connection as stemming from relationships, shared experiences and opportunities to get involved. Major themes include:

#### **Opportunities to Celebrate Together**

A common theme was the importance of events and activities. People mentioned enjoying concerts, movies in the park, farmers markets, festivals and cultural events. Participants described feeling especially connected to Vancouver when we celebrate our community's diversity. Sharing food, culture and experiences were highlighted as key components of community-building events. Participants mentioned the Multicultural Resource Fair, Juneteenth Freedom Celebration, Pride Block Party, Pride in the Park, Paddy Hough Parade and National Night Out as examples of events that bring our community together. Multiple groups discussed the importance of free or low-cost events, which are open to all community members. Others noted the benefit of establishing annual traditions, such as holiday events, makers markets and community cleanups. Participants said that such events are particularly meaningful because they bring people together year after year, building memories and tradition.

#### **Opportunities to Serve**

Participants highlighted the role of helping others and giving back as directly related to how connected they feel to the community. These participants spoke about their experiences volunteering as part of local nonprofits, school communities and neighborhood associations. Whether it is participating in a park cleanup or volunteering at their child's school, participants

said that opportunities to serve provide a sense of shared goals and purpose. As one participant put it, when I volunteer, “I know we’re in this together.” Some people also mentioned feeling connected through their jobs, especially when their work involves serving the community.

### **Relationships and Social Networks**

Many participants shared that getting to know their neighbors and recognizing people around town were key to their sense of connection. Although Vancouver has grown significantly in recent years, many participants mentioned the “small-town feel” that comes from being in community with those you know. Some people said they feel connected to their neighborhood, where they know others well. Others shared that they feel disconnected in their immediate neighborhood but have found connection through groups that span the wider community.

### **Shared Spaces and Places**

Participants pointed to community spaces, local businesses and Vancouver’s beautiful natural environment as important sources of connection. These participants highlighted parks, libraries, community centers, schools and local gathering spaces as particularly important. They noted that these locations serve multiple purposes, sometimes as the host of events and sometimes as a “third space” where people can go outside of home or work. Participants especially valued spaces and events that are welcoming to all, including those that offer multilingual access or celebrate different cultures. Many said that the river, parks and outdoor areas play a big role in helping people feel rooted in the community. Others pointed to how nonprofits and faith communities foster a sense of connection by organizing volunteer opportunities.

### **Question #2: What barriers might prevent some residents from fully benefitting from the opportunities that our community offers — such as jobs, education, parks or community programs?**

Groups spent significant time discussing barriers that can make it harder for people to benefit from community opportunities. They noted how factors, such as disability, health, income, personal connections, safety and systemic barriers often intertwine, with many people facing multiple challenges at once. For many community members, this topic is also deeply personal. Participants across every table described how barriers have affected their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers or themselves. As a result, many tables’ conversations were far reaching. Key themes include:

### **Access and Infrastructure**

Participants shared that physical barriers, such as broken sidewalks, steep stairs, limited curb access and a lack of accessible seating, can make it difficult to get around. These concerns were especially significant for older adults and people with disabilities. Multiple participants described avoiding areas where access was limited by construction or deciding not to attend a meeting or event because of a lack of accommodations. Many participants noted a connection between accessibility and transportation. They highlighted limited transit options, the cost of gas, parking challenges (including limited accessible parking spots) and long travel times as factors that further isolate people from the community. For community members who depend on transit to get around, the effects are even more pronounced. These individuals described

recent investments in C-TRAN's Vine service as positive steps forward. Still, they noted that barriers remain, including when travelling from one side of the City to the other or for trips requiring multiple transfers. Some participants also noted that events are often concentrated in downtown, which can make it harder for those in central or east Vancouver to participate.

### **Financial Burdens**

Many community members described economic barriers as among the most common and harmful factors preventing people from accessing opportunities in our community. The high cost of living, including housing, food, transportation and recreation, is a constant source of anxiety for many. Some groups discussed how income requirements for benefits or housing assistance can inadvertently create their own barriers, as well. Multiple participants described losing benefits when they began earning just above an income eligibility threshold. Others pointed out that financial burdens tend to compound, creating additional burdens around time or scheduling. Participants noted that because some people must work multiple jobs or long hours, they are left with little time or energy to engage. Because events, meetings and services are often accessible only during work hours, these individuals and their families face additional barriers to participating.

### **Communication and Language Access**

Although many community members said that they try to keep up with City activities and current events, participants across all tables highlighted communication as a persistent barrier. Many people said they have a hard time finding information about available resources, services or events, or they hear about them too late. Participants noted that the City and community groups often share information on social media or on websites, which can exclude people without internet access. These community members pointed to the importance of print newsletters, flyers in public spaces and signs placed around the community. Multiple participants described navigating language barriers and complex systems as related challenges. These issues are particularly acute for recent immigrants, those with a disability or those with limited English proficiency. Participants suggested expanding access to translation, interpretation and accommodations to address these barriers.

### **Personal Safety**

Some participants said they do not feel safe attending events or being in certain areas, such as poorly lit parks, at night. Participants noted that fear related to crime or immigration enforcement can prevent people from taking part in activities. Multiple participants shared that they or those they know in the Latino community feel especially unsafe at the moment. This has led to decreased participation in events, fewer visitors to local businesses and, for some, a withdrawal from community life. In some cases, people described feeling more comfortable engaging only within trusted groups or smaller communities. Some residents also described avoiding certain parks or trails, because of open drug use or the impacts of unsheltered homelessness.

## **Youth and Families**

Participating young people and adults who work in social services shared specific concerns about barriers faced by youth and families. These community members pointed to limited activities for young people, lack of youth engagement and ongoing impacts from the pandemic, such as social anxiety and learning challenges. Some felt that systems do not fully support youth, especially those who are struggling in school. Others emphasized the need to support whole families, not just individuals. These community members said that access to childcare, after-school programs and recreation opportunities present a barrier for many families.

## **Social and Cultural Barriers**

Multiple groups noted that cultural differences and lack of representation can make people feel like they don't belong. If people don't see others like themselves, they may be less likely to participate. Participants noted that these factors work alongside language and communication barriers to limit access and opportunity. They suggested that the City continue to partner with community groups and share information in ways that are culturally relevant.

## **Systemic Barriers**

A smaller number of participants discussed systemic and policy barriers. These include complex regulations, funding limitations and policies that may unintentionally create challenges for residents. Participants referenced earlier conversations about the accessibility of social services, noting that learning about a program, taking the time to apply and satisfying eligibility requirements can all create barriers for participants.

## **Question #3: How can we improve belonging for people of all ages, backgrounds and income levels?**

Groups varied greatly in how they approached this question. While some spent time discussing ways to address barriers identified earlier in the conversation, others focused on creative ways to build a sense of belonging. Some groups even spent time designing future community events, which they could host or co-host with the City. Across conversations, the most prominent themes include:

### **Provide Greater Economic Opportunity**

Building on earlier discussions, almost all tables spoke about the need to address poverty, food insecurity and the cost of living. Participants pointed out that it is impossible to feel a sense of belonging in the community if you can't afford basic necessities, such as food and housing. These community members would like to see Vancouver provide better-paying jobs, training programs and support systems that provide stability. Others called for investments in job training, skills development and support for small businesses and entrepreneurship.

### **Expand Access to Community Spaces and Events**

To foster a greater sense of belonging, many participants discussed the need for inclusion and access. People suggested holding events in more neighborhoods, not just downtown, and offering them at different times to fit different schedules. Many participants reiterated the importance of free or low-cost events, transportation support and accessible spaces (including

parking and seating). Participants also emphasized the need for more “third spaces” where people of all ages and abilities can gather and connect.

### **Improve Communication and Civic Engagement**

Many participants noted a connection between communication, participation and belonging. They suggested that people will feel more connected to the community if they know what’s going on and are able to actively contribute, through volunteering or civic engagement. Participants said the City and community partners should do more to share information clearly and in multiple formats. This includes using print materials, improving the accessibility of websites and continuing to connect with residents via social media. Participants also called for more translation, interpretation and culturally relevant outreach. They stressed the importance of meeting people where they are and making sure everyone feels welcome participating. Some suggested that the City expand use of text alerts to better reach residents.

### **Build and Strengthen Relationships**

Many groups revisited the topic of relationships and reflected that personal connections are among the biggest contributors to a sense of belonging. Accordingly, our community should seek to build stronger connections between the City, local organizations, businesses and residents. People noted that efforts are often siloed and could be more effective with better collaboration. Supporting local organizations that are already doing community-building work was seen as a key strategy, as were specific efforts supporting youth involvement. Teen participants would like to see more youth-focused events and activities, along with opportunities to grow as community leaders.

### **Next Steps**

Feedback from the March 23 forum will be shared with City Councilors, staff and participants to help guide possible next steps. Staff from the City’s Engagement and Access Department will share specific findings with colleagues in Community Development, who are leading work on the City’s comprehensive plan, and staff in Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services, who manage community centers and events. The City’s Office of Neighborhoods will also integrate ideas from the forum into ongoing efforts to build community and strengthen relationships at the neighborhood level.

If community members would like to build belonging by hosting their own project or event, we encourage them to apply for a community and neighborhood grant at [cityofvancouver.us/communitygrants](https://cityofvancouver.us/communitygrants).