

Environmental education pushed

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E3 gathering promotes partnership with local business, political leaders.

The wisdom of educating the public about environmental matters was examined in detail this week during a conference attended by local representatives of government, business and the general public.

"Our purpose is to work out a way to broaden environmental education in Kitsap County," said former South Kitsap Commissioner Charlotte Garrido, who helped organize the event. "We are all concerned about the environment, and people in all walks of life need to be drawn into this discussion."

While the focus of the E3 (standing for education, environment and economy) event was extensively local, it is part of a statewide network meant to develop a more cohesive policy across Washington.

Tuesday's gathering at Suquamish's scenic Kiana Lodge was one of 18 such events held throughout the state, and the data gathered will be used to make recommendations that will hopefully create state policy.

"I expect reports will be written next spring," said Environmental Education Association of Washington Executive Director Abby Ruskey. "The recommendations will be ready in time for the 2009 legislative session."

Ruskey said the process is designed to connect everyone involved with environmental learning in schools, communities and businesses. "there are several groups who can contribute," she said. "There are tribes, businesses, the military, faith-based groups and others. The first step is to connect all of them and develop a relationship where they can exchange ideas across regions."

In this context education goes beyond schooling. Keynote speaker Kathy Fletcher noted that her 22-year old son always reminds her that, "It is still our generation's job to get things right. It is a complete cop-out to say that we need to focus on the young for education about the environment. We are not past our prime."

Fletcher, a longtime environmental activist who is now the executive director of People for Puget Sound, said it is often difficult for individuals to stay on a dedicated environmental path.

"A lot of environmental education is directed at individuals," she said. "They are told they need to do the right thing, like not build a bulkhead, or take the bus or ride a bike. But it can be discouraging to do all of those things in our personal lives and then see a huge project next door that is destroying the environment.

"You then ask yourself why you are riding your bike every day," she said, "when they are always building more highways to accommodate more cars. It is important for people to be inspired and motivated to make our environment livable in the long run. But it is discouraging when what we do as individuals is not reinforced and completely swept aside by decisions made by government and large companies."

Throughout the day, attendees discussed how they could educate themselves and the community about environmental issues. At several times it was noted how the group was not especially diverse. With some exceptions attendees were white, and within the boundaries of middle age.

There was the idea that environmental education will be lacking without consideration of those who fall into lower income brackets. While the conference was free, it still excluded many people who could have provided valuable input.

Said Kitsap Community Alliance for Self-Help Director Stuart Walton, "We should have made a greater effort and actually invited many of these people."

On the other hand, the event's homogeneity was an advantage. Many attendees remembered the first Earth Day in 1970, seeing the movement evolve from a curious offshoot of the anti-war

efforts into a force that changed how people treat the land. After all, there was a time when littering was acceptable.

Kitsap County Solid Waste Technician Colleen Uureb said, "there was a lot of energy in the room. There was also a larger representation of local business people than at other events. Usually they draw about one table of people in business, here we had three."

While there was an acknowledgement that profitmongering, anti-environment business people still exist, there was a sense that business could be part of the solution.

"We need to balance our roles as stewards of the cultural habitat with the needs of economic development and job creation," said Suquamish Tribal Chairman Leonard Forsman. "We see climate change, but there is also a change in building practices and retrofitting that can be a part of economic development. There is an entire industry that comes from being green, and we need to seize that opportunity."

"In many cases a market-based solution can help the environment," said Homebuilders of Kitsap County Executive Vice President Art Castle. "Regulatory solutions often cause polarization. How we implement these changes can be important, and if we facilitate the 'how,' we can make wiser choices and work more effectively. For example, there are low-impact ways of treating stormwater that can reduce development costs and provide tremendous environmental benefits."

After the keynote speech, attendees split into smaller groups, first addressing future visualization and designing environmentally responsible citizens with the use of human outlines and sticky pads. Following this, discussion became more specific with topics such as business, schools and the media.

The meeting broke up with the informal promise to take what was learned into the community at large.

For information about the process as it progresses, go on-line to www.e3washington.org.

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