

Breaking bread and breaking ground on sharing ideas

By: Aldo Santin

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It may invoke the idea of speed dating, but Loren Remillard hopes the event will create important discussions about the community.

Loren Remillard winces at the suggestion the unique local event he's planning in November for members of Winnipeg city council could be likened to a night of speed

dating with your city councillor.

But Remillard, president of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, said the Nov. 16 dinner will get civic politicians shuffling between tables filled with community leaders from all sectors, where they can talk about their concerns and priorities.

"We're hoping to make this an annual signature event," Remillard said. "We're bringing together all the voices that are really helping to drive our city forward to sit at a table and really have a wide-ranging conversation."

Remillard said the details are still being ironed out but the concept is simple: one city hall guest will sit at each table with nine other guests — leaders representing business, labour, non-profits — where they can talk about the issues that are most important to them.

The city hall guests will include the mayor and 15 members of council, along with four to six senior administrators. At the end of each course, the city hall people get up and move to another table and talk with nine other community leaders.

Over a three-course meal, council members and senior administrators will have three, 45-minute sessions with community leaders, talking to each other about what's most important to them.

"There is no pre-set agenda," Remillard said. "It will be dependent on who is at the table and which councillor is at that table and they drive the conversation.

"It's really an opportunity for all 16 members of council and senior administration to sit down over the course of an evening and hear from those community leaders as to issues that are important to them, as well as the individual councillors and the mayor to talk and convey their priorities, what they're seeing in their wards and the city at large... it really is about community dialogue."

The initiative appears to have the support of city hall. Mayor Brian Bowman's press secretary, Jeremy Davis, said Bowman will attend.

"It is an effective way for elected officials to gain feedback from community leaders in a way that can constructively move discussions forward on a wide range of issues of concern," Davis said.

North Kildonan Coun. Jeff Browaty said he's looking forward to the event, adding the evening promises to provide city hall a perspective on issues it doesn't always get.

"While we're talking to people all the time, we're not always hearing about what their businesses or organizations are about," Browaty said. "I think the evening the chamber is organizing in November will be a good opportunity to further grow our relationships, for the mutual benefit of the city."

The community leaders at each table will come from a variety of backgrounds to ensure no single topic dominates individual sittings, Remillard said, adding the format will provide an opportunity for some debate for issues the community leaders bring up.

"I'm sure some people will raise issues that are critical to their organizations but we really hope this is about fostering understanding of priorities, hopefully shared priorities," Remillard said. "Our hope is that as many conversations take place as possible, that is really the intent, to foster that kind of dialogue."

Remillard said while he's received positive support from city hall, he hasn't yet identified or invited any community leaders. More details will come in the fall.

Remillard concedes that the guests will largely be the same people who regularly appear at city council committee meetings but said this will be the only opportunity they have to all meet together, with politicians and senior administrators.

"We encourage people to come, participate and connect, and raise issues they're seeing in their community and their lines of work," Remillard said. "As well, it's equally important for councillors, the mayor and senior administrators to feed back to all those voices, 'here's our perspective, here's our priorities, here's what I'm thinking.' It is not a one-way conversation."

While this would be a first for Winnipeg, he acknowledged that the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce holds a similar event with provincial politicians.

aldo.santin@freepress.mb.ca

Read more by Aldo Santin.