

November 24, 2014

Dear Mayor Malcolm Brodie and Richmond council members,

First, congratulations on your re-election Mr Mayor, and the election and re-election of winning council members. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to council.

I am David Beattie, and my colleague is Allan Hunt. We are the lead organizers with a venture known as "The HELLO Project." This undertaking is nearly one year old now, and has now attained Charitable Status. In as few words as possible, the goal is to erode Metro Vancouver's biggest problem as much as possible as inexpensively as possible. To do this, we intend to launch a major advertising campaign about one year from now, making tens of thousands and hopefully hundreds of thousands of Metro residents aware of a logo whose purpose will be explained. The idea is that people wearing the logo on a lapel button will be understood to be inviting anyone who sees that logo on them to approach, say hello, and ideally chat for a few minutes or even longer. The implications are enormous and profound.

Without making too much of the demographics of Richmond in particular, it is clear that relationships between local residents who speak different first languages has probably not been enhanced by the debate over Chinese-only signs. Indeed, it is the issue of multilingualism and multiculturalism, in its Metro Vancouver manifestation, that is a major contributor to Metro's challenge of overcoming social isolation.

We have prepared a more detailed explanation and analysis of "The HELLO Project" as set out below. We would very much like Richmond council members to read this before our delegation, or at least afterward, and consider the city's possible participation in this campaign.

We of course invite comments and questions.

David Beattie and Allan Hunt.

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The annals of history are full of examples of simple and sometimes even trivial inventions, gadgets and simple human acts having a major impact. Consider the ballpoint pen for example, sunglasses, the humble match, the upraised thumb used for hitchhiking. Sometimes both objects and human behaviours that appear deceptively simple on the surface can have unexpected ripple effects massively disproportionate to their low cost and lack of complexity.

It is in that spirit that we ask you to consider a simple intervention designed to partially counter a complex phenomenon that's been called the Bubonic plague of the 21st Century - SOCIAL ISOLATION. That intervention will be fully explained in a minute, but

first we need to say a little more about social isolation in the Metro Vancouver context.

This societal challenge is a growing concern in most parts of the developed world, and research appears to indicate that Metro Vancouver is particularly afflicted. Since a Vancouver Foundation study in 2012, "Connections and Engagement," there must be very few Metro residents working or interested in any kind of social service not aware of its finding that social isolation was the number one complaint identified by the thousands of people surveyed.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this - an in-depth study of thousands of ordinary residents across all demographics throughout Metro Vancouver, and in interviews with 275 charities and 100 community leaders, social isolation ranked ahead of all of the other "usual suspects" that have characterized life in Vancouver for decades - the high cost of housing, environmental concerns, crime, inadequate transit, rapid population growth and densification being the most prominent perhaps.

In addition to emerging as the surprise top concern, please keep another key point in mind: social isolation does not only make people unhappy - it makes them literally sick, so much so they die sooner. It is what we might call a "foundational" problem, and one that is multi-directional - both a cause and result of other ills such as substance abuse, loss of employment, physical and mental illness, homelessness etc.

The degree of damage incurred by severe social isolation needs to be fully understood. Here is a number that is sure to impress you - neuroscientists have found that social isolation is FOUR TIMES as damaging as obesity, and more common in North America, at least. It has four times the "morbidity factor" according to Dr John Cacioppo, a US researcher who is a the leading commentator on the subject. We strongly recommend viewing this 10-minute video (from YouTube) which explains how loneliness is such a killer.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyAlnObWfrE>)

Since the Vancouver Foundation study many groups, agencies and government departments have turned their attention to finding ways to erode social isolation. The Metro Vancouver Alliance, a loose coalition of labour unions, faith groups and community groups, has a special committee dedicated to promoting social engagement. Vancouver Coastal Health has done its own study, with findings similar to those of the Vancouver Foundation, and suggested ways to tackle the problem. The mayor of the City of Vancouver, Gregor Robertson, created an "Engaged City Task Force" to study it and make recommendations, and the regional government, Metro Vancouver, is also turning its attention to what it sees as a problem so serious it has the potential to undermine a host of other initiatives aimed at "sustainability."

This is an excerpt from a Metro government report: "By many accounts the Metro Vancouver region is on the fast track to sustainability, renowned for being "green", embracing diversity and scoring high in terms of livability. But new research by the

Vancouver Foundation suggests that people in the region may be feeling a sense of isolation – a lack of connection to their neighbours, to their community and by extension to their city and region – a finding that has the potential to undermine even the best sustainability efforts."

Its report continues: "What factors are contributing to this trend - our planning approaches and patterns of growth? Our growing population, or increasingly multicultural population? The transition to a digital age? Other factors yet to be determined? How do we address this divide and build social connections that foster strong and healthy communities? What examples of cohesive communities can we learn from moving forward?"

While it is relatively easy to identify the contributing factors to social isolation, finding ways to tackle it meaningfully, to make major advances as opposed to nibbling around the edges, is proving to be far more difficult. Proposed solutions include changing urban design to make more compact, walkable neighbourhoods, encouraging communal tables in coffee shops and restaurants, encouraging condo developers to include communal activity rooms for residents to meet and mingle, and making more community gardens, farmers' markets, adult day care programs and childcare spaces to facilitate connection. All of these will help, but they are all slow, expensive or require intensive staffing.

Allow us to introduce "The Hello Project." It's this simple: people wear a lapel button with a logo on it. After a massive advertising campaign (throughout Metro Vancouver) launching the logo and explaining what it is and how it works, the button-wearing person can expect to have other people greet them and have a short chat, or two button-wearing strangers will immediately recognize the other as inviting others for a chat. We say short chat, but it could be a long one actually, or a series of chats leading to a friendship. As we like to say, it's "an icebreaker without saying a word." What happens after the contact is made is anyone's guess - but it seems likely to prompt so many interpersonal, face-to-face contacts it will cascade through society like an old-fashioned version of Facebook. This is not so much Facebook and social media as FaceLook, and social me-need-er!

Who, where and when will this happen? Easy to answer - anybody, anywhere, anytime. Whoever wants to wear the button can, they can do it wherever they want, and at any time they choose. We imagine the Skytrain will be a popular location for it, as will buses. Commuting often allows enough time for a chat, but not so long that one will be trapped into a lengthy exchange against their will. Another major location will be coffee shops. A more controlled environment such as coffee shops will make some people feel safe enough to take the chance. In coffee shops, restaurants, pubs and even mall food courts, people wanting company can announce their openness via the button, or by using a coffee cup with the logo, or a card set on their table. There is the added safety and comfort of knowing that if they meet someone who becomes a nuisance or menace, there are staff and others on hand to intervene.

How will people get the buttons and other items with the logo? The buttons will be handed out, free, in their tens of thousands at places where people gather - Skytrain stations, major bus stops, coffee shops, at fairs and festivals, at colleges and universities, community centres, neighbourhood houses, libraries, anywhere and everywhere that makes sense for them to be distributed. More costly items such as coffee cups, t-shirts and ballcaps will be on sale at all locations where the proprietor wants to encourage social engagement and in particular, on their premises.

Which brings us to perhaps the key point in making this address to you and your colleagues today: We want you to partner with us. By that we mean we want you to participate in this campaign at any level and in any way you choose. This includes having you or a representative sit at the table with us and help shape the entire project.

We are aware that while the project is very simple at its heart, it is at the same time radical and ambitious. We know and accept that it needs development and refinement, perhaps remodelling while at the same time staying true to its core. For this we need and want the benefit of your insight and professional expertise. From the outset it has been envisaged as a massive multi-partner coalition, embracing the private sector and a whole host of public sector entities - government, non-profits, charities, social service agencies, tourism, healthcare, even law enforcement. Social isolation knows no boundaries, and so neither should efforts to roll it back.

In addition to the socially disruptive results of the digital age, common throughout the developed world, the major barriers to social interaction in Metro Vancouver are its very rapid population growth, especially featuring so many different ethnicities with very different languages and cultures. Generational differences, too, add to the demographic silos, as do a whole slew of financial difficulties relating to the high cost of living requiring long working hours, long commutes, housing affordability and social class distinctions.

What is so potentially transformative about the Hello button is that it is at the same time highly personal and totally universal - applying equally across these demographic gulfs. The prospect of a native English-speaking Canadian and a new Chinese-Canadian immigrant with little English having some sort of contact is dramatically increased if one or both are wearing a Hello button, as opposed to neither of them doing so. The same goes for young and old, maybe even rich and poor.

The logo, which is a work in progress, must be extremely carefully crafted to reflect its universal appeal. It will bear no language, as that clearly pegs it to one or more specific cultures. Keep in mind that a large part of the media launch will appear in ethnic media - Mandarin/Cantonese newspapers, radio and TV, Punjabi newspapers, magazines and other media aimed at Indo-Canadians, and Farsi, Filipino and Spanish language media.

While we hope and expect that this campaign will kick off in Metro Vancouver, it is not

fanciful - if it is successful - to expect it to catch on in other cities and countries. Other cities might want to design their own logo, or stick with the one we come up with. We are reaching out to graphic designers in Vancouver and worldwide to design a logo for the purpose we intend, and then submit their bids to be the chosen one.

The biggest challenge we envisage is raising enough money for a truly huge, multimedia advertising campaign that, one, gets the message to a critical mass of Metro residents, and two, generates enough buzz and excitement to propel a truly spectacular launch. We must go big on this, it's the only way. Tackling it via a slow, organic, incremental approach will undermine its very essence.

So, to be blunt, please help us in three ways: add your contribution to the fundraising, add the outreach of your organization to the awareness drive, and get involved in shaping the entire project - if you want to and have the time and inclination to do so. The time commitment is up to you and your organization - from very small to very large. We can discuss the details later.

We intend involving the private sector - companies, business, in the advertising and shaping of HELLO because we know we have something to sell. The major commercial sponsors will have their logos included on all of our material, merchandise and advertisements to proclaim their contribution to this direct, universal outreach.

In the first instance we plan to partner with a number of coffee chains, as coffee shops are such a logical place for this to play itself out. Pubs and restaurants, especially fast food restaurants, are other logical venues, and they too will be invited to take part. Given the importance of a huge advertising launch, we will invite media to partner with us and make their contribution via significant discounts on advertising space and time. Communications giants such as Telus, Rogers and Bell will be courted to assist, as will private education institutes, on and on it goes.

From the public sector we are hoping for buy-in from colleges and universities, many community groups and civil society agencies such as neighbourhood houses, community centres, from immigrant-serving agencies such as SUCCESS, Mosaic and the Immigration Services Society, from tourism bodies such as Tourism Vancouver and Tourism BC, and from health care entities such as Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Valley Health. Hospitals are clearly the kind of place the Hello button could be used beneficially. At the time of the announcement of this campaign earlier this year Hello volunteers were repeatedly told by Vancouver Police Department and RCMP officers, encountered in coffee shops where early testing was being done, that the police were highly supportive of the idea.

Government at all four levels - municipal, regional, provincial and federal, will be solicited to join the coalition. Presentations have been made to the full city councils of the three largest cities in metro - Vancouver, Surrey and Burnaby, and all three are supportive at least in principle at this early stage. We will apply for funding from each

and every of the region's 18 municipal governments, from regional government Metro Vancouver, from a number of provincial ministries, and a number of federal departments.

The Vancouver Foundation itself is expected to be a key partner, for obvious reasons. We are optimistic that other funding bodies such as United Way will also see the benefit of a pool of funders and participants.

Which brings us to this major point: in an age where society is so splintered along myriad lines of identity - age, ethnicity, social class, language etc, in which large sectors of society are transient and dislocated, it is rare to find an easy and inexpensive common denominator to trump those differences. The Hello button is such a factor.

Another major challenge will be getting the message and the buttons to the folk who perhaps need it most - the truly isolated and vulnerable such as disabled, home-bound people, seniors with major barriers to social participation, the mentally ill and addicted, the homeless, people of that nature. This is where teaming up with agencies that deliver services to the marginalized makes such sense, is in fact essential to the success of the campaign.

To conclude and reiterate, we are sincerely inviting you to partner with us in three ways: one, by helping to shape the project generally; two, specifically putting the word out to your clients and target population and helping to distribute buttons when the time comes; and three, making a financial contribution for the very necessary advertising campaign.

The vast majority of funds raised will go for this purpose. Some money will be needed to make the buttons and the other items such as coffee cups, coffee sleeves, Hello cards, ballcaps and t-shirts, and some used as wages for the two part-time Hello staff spearheading the project. David Beattie and Allan Hunt are employed 30 hours a week each, on modest wages of just \$1,500 per month. In time it might be necessary for them to work full-time, or to add more paid staff. Much of the distribution will be done by volunteers, as will as much of the work as practical and possible.

Thank your for your time and attention. Questions are invited.

David Beattie and Allan Hunt, co-organizers, The Hello Project.