

Public-input-forum turnout garners call for more

By SARA REED

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Put more than 130 people in a room, and you'll likely get more than 130 differing opinions. But Wednesday night, local government officials and employees, local activists and residents came together to identify what they thought were the most important issues facing Fort Collins.

The Community Issues Forum, held at the Lincoln Center, was the kick-off event for Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation, which was formed last summer to facilitate community dialogue. The center offers many levels of assistance in getting that dialogue going, from hosting and facil-

On the Internet

Visit www.cpd.colostate.edu for more information on Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation.

itating discussions to getting people connected.

Transportation, health care, poverty, K-12 education and immigration were issues identified during the forum, although in-depth conversations were not held on those topics. The forum's purpose was to simply identify the topics, said Martin Carcasson, founder and head of the center and an associate professor of speech com-

munication at CSU.

James Ross, a lecturer in the political science department at CSU, said there were a lot of people with a lot of things to say during the forum.

"I think this is a great idea for including the public in defining issues that are important to the community," he said. "There are too few opportunities for public input, especially when it comes to setting the agenda."

However, Ross said he'd like to see additional forums hosted at different sites as a way to draw a more diverse group of people. For example, people who work more than one job might not have had the opportunity to attend

or maybe, didn't feel comfortable doing so, he said.

"We need a few of these," he said. "Take this in to the community and host it where they (residents) feel welcome."

Carcasson's students facilitated the group discussions. Krystal Angelo, who graduated last semester, was among the facilitators.

The event was very productive, she said, and a lot of people got to voice their feelings and concerns.

"A lot of issues heard were invisible problems," she said, mentioning homelessness among PSD students as an example.

Using the information gathered at the forum, Carcasson's students will pick a topic for their semester

project, and forums on particular topics could be seen in the future. The information also will be presented to Fort Collins City Council next month.

Residents also are welcome to contact the center about hosting or organizing a forum.

Carcasson said he was pleased with the turnout.

"I learned that 60 RSVPs equals 130 people show up," he joked as he wrapped the evening up.

Carcasson said he thought the event went well and was pleased by the community's reaction.

"I've already had 40 people tell me they want to get together for coffee next week and talk with me," he said.

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and cold temperatures
High today: 27
Low tonight: 8
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by the United States Constitution:
"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Our View

Community invited to set public agenda

CSU Center for Public Deliberation to have community issues forum

Imagine discussing issues important to the community without the taint or pressure of partisan politics, name calling and extremism.

It can happen, if the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation is successful. The project, launched by CSU

Speech professor Martin Carcasson, seeks to engage residents in a dialogue that enhances "local democracy through improved public communication and community problem solving."

In its effort to focus on issues, the center is asking residents to participate in setting its agenda based on what issues are important to the community. The Community Issues Forum is Wednesday at the Lincoln Center.

Such a center urgently is needed in our community.

Participate

The CSU Center for Public Deliberation's Kickoff Event and First Annual Community Issues Forum will be from 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in the Columbine Room at the Lincoln Center, 417 W. Magnolia, Fort Collins. RSVP preferred to Martin Carcasson, 491-5628 or cpd@colostate.edu.

Increasingly, our elections are beset by personal attacks rather than formulative solutions. For example, Northern Colorado residents were "treated" last fall to one of the nastiest elections in the 4th Congressional District. The campaign — which was, unfortunately, not unique in its tone — was punctuated with ads containing personal attacks, half truths and distortions rather than meaningful discussions about Colorado's future.

Those who believe that speaking loudest or with the most voices always is right will not benefit from this program. But for those who want to have a role in improving the community and shaping public policy, this is a significant opportunity. And residents who prefer solving problems over "winning" a debate or even an election likely will find comfort in the Center for Public Deliberation's approach, which offers a safe and respectful environment for discourse.

One of the center's most laudable goals is to identify community, rather than government, issues. And there is a difference between the two. A public that does not participate in addressing or even identifying its own issues leaves that responsibility to the government, which may not be the most efficient or targeted approach. Meanwhile, low public participation and little public oversight leaves governments vulnerable to manipulation from a few.

Carcasson and his team are commended for recognizing and fulfilling this need in our community.