

Sustainability summit attempts to bring future into focus

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Marvin Fong/The Plain Dealer "This is a rare moment where leadership of the city has come together, one moment to dream big," said Van Jones, the green jobs adviser at the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

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CLEVELAND -- The future is not real for too many Americans, and most of us are just dimly aware of the energy and climate problems we face, a top scientist and consultant told more than 700 people attending the Sustainable Cleveland 2019 summit Wednesday.

"It's not surprising that we ignore the future and go about our business," Peter Senge, a professor at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said in a sobering, 45-minute lecture describing a future as frightening as it will be tough to fix.

The crowd of handpicked summit participants, representing a broad cross-section of the region, is charged with developing tools to move Northeast Ohio's economy and culture to sustainable practices by 2019. The summit continues today and Friday at the Cleveland Convention Center.

In between lectures delivered by heavyweights like Senge, the participants were deeply involved in an ongoing workshop developed by David Cooperrider, a professor at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management.

By Friday afternoon, Cooperrider expects them, working in small groups around 92 tables on the floor of Public Hall, to come up with a broad outline of what has to be done for the region's economy to survive.

Senge, a consultant to governments and global corporations, talked of waste, limited global resources and the specter of climate change.

"There is an extraordinary amount off waste," he said. "We take [resources]. We make [products]. We waste [trash]. We all live with blinders on. It's very hard to see the larger system."

The possibility that climate change is real has dawned on people and companies across the globe, he said.

"Climate change is like a 38-year-old having a heart attack. I think climate change is proving to be the straw breaking this camel's back," he said. "But climate change is not the issue. We have to do something about our way of life, how we live."

In an interview following the session, Senge said that he could not say how effective the Cleveland summit might be, but that some changes resulting from the effort would have to be evident after three to six months -- or the opportunity will have passed.

"I see a lot of talk, not a lot of action for the last two years around the world. So many meetings. I don't think it will be easy. There will be a lot of suffering."

Countering Senge -- though agreeing that the problems are real and deep and that people are finally waking up -- Marc Lautenbach, head of IBM Corp.'s North America operations, said the problems can be solved with technology.

He said IBM is convening a series of similar conferences in an effort to mobilize governments.

"A crisis is a terrible thing to waste," he said, quoting Rahm Emanuel, President Barack Obama's chief of staff.

The global economic crisis that began in September has sparked interest in efficiency, energy production and pollution control around the globe, he said. For example, IBM is helping a Texas utility build a "smart grid" that will significantly reduce how much power must be generated. IBM is working with governments at home and abroad to computerize water, power, traffic, security and education systems, he said.

The three-day summit is the brainchild of Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, who argues that if the region does not adapt, it has no viable future.

"It is not a question of if a sustainable economy will happen or even when it will happen," Jackson told the crowd at the beginning of the day. "The only question is who will be first."

The summit also has gained the attention of the Obama administration.

Van Jones, the green jobs adviser at the White House Council on Environmental Quality, praised the effort in an address Wednesday morning.

"This is a rare moment where leadership of the city has come together, one moment to dream big," he said.

"This is not the time for small dreams, because your country needs you, because future generations need you. There are two futures, one with us going down, down and the other with us soaring to heights we cannot even dream of now."

The speech brought the crowd to its feet in a prolonged standing ovation.

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