

Santa Clara Hosts Second Ethics and Democracy Summit

More than 30 City Clerk professionals from across the state recently met in the Santa Clara City Council Chambers for the second California Ethics and Democracy Summit.

Their effort was a unique collaboration to share community and voter engagement strategies and hear from some of the top City Clerk and political ethics professionals.

"The California Ethics and Democracy Project has offered a platform to develop and share best practices across California, bringing voters to the polls and launching inspirational ethics programs," said Colleen Nicol, President of the International Institute of Municipal Clerks. "Resources to inform voters about local candidates are the foundational elements of democracy and good government."

The California Ethics and Democracy Project (CEDP) was founded in 2007 with the goals to share resources and examples, formulate best practices, and create an education curriculum to teach the skills necessary to implement good government efforts. "Santa Clara has some of the best programs in the state, they're a solid model," says Santa Clara City Clerk and Auditor Rod Diridon, Jr. "But, this type of collaboration will help us to be even more effective by learning what other communities find successful."

You may remember that in 2009, the first California Ethics Summit was held, also in Santa Clara. This initial gathering of City Clerks yielded 19 "Pioneer Cities" working to implement some type of good government program in their own unique communities. This most recent Summit was an opportunity for these Pioneer Cities to share what they had learned through two years of hard work.

"These templates are a foundation for furthering the role of transparent and effective municipal systems in an easy to understand format," said Maureen Kane, the Director of the California Municipal Clerks Institutes. "The CEDP provides tangible examples of how the Clerk's unique, unbiased role can benefit the community through good government and community outreach campaigns."

Through the course of the Summit, participants heard reports from four of the top Pioneer Cities, as well as collaborative lectures from political consultant Rich

Robinson, ethics consultant Dr. Tom Shanks and Diridon. One of the clear benefits of the Summit was a better understanding of the practical demands of the political process, allowing City Clerks to anticipate how to engage the public in a more productive dialogue. "Santa Clara is the state leader in providing ethical models for local political campaigns," says political consultant Robinson. "Educating candidates, campaigns and voters is essential to a healthy political process and keeping everyone honest."

"It's important to find the right balance for City Clerks to raise the caliber of debate and public engagement, without influencing elections or chilling free speech," says Diridon. "But, doing so properly is one of the highest callings of the profession."

The California Ethics Project works in partnership with local communities, City Councils, City Managers and City Clerks associations to explore the Clerk's role in fostering codes of values and ethics, campaign finance reform, community and voter outreach efforts, and other good government programs. The unbiased nature of the City Clerk/Elections Official is unique and provides a license to implement good government programs in a manner that is beyond reproach. Through this, the project will provide the tools for California's voters to more effectively vet candidates, raise the caliber of debate and be increasingly engaged in the process of democracy.

For more information, visit CAEthicsProject.org.