

Good Neighbours

By Brett Thompson

Think of organizing summits and what comes to mind are the complex logistics and delicate diplomatic dances required to bring the leaders into the country, let alone get them around the same table. But when you're inviting the world over, especially to a place the size of Huntsville, Ont. (population 19,000), you'd better make sure your neighbours are happy. This is why DFAIT's Summits Management Office (SMO) created a division committed to the community and set it to work getting to know—and be known in—the town.

After the SMO was established in the spring of 2009, a few members of the Office held a town-hall briefing for Huntsville residents. It was standing-room-only in the 400-seat theatre. Questions focused on the effect of the summit on day-to-day life. Which roads will be closed? What about protestors?

Many concerns were answered through news releases, briefings by security officials and a toll-free information line. But more personal interaction with summit organizers would help the area realize the many opportunities the G-8 summit could bring. By summer, the Environmental Issues and Community Liaison Division began its work.

Members of the team, which has grown to 10 members, visited Huntsville at least once a month to meet with residents. There were unique settings for our briefings. One was on a Hudson's Bay blanket at the local pioneer village, where we discussed the youth summit that will run concurrently with the



Blanketing the community: Members of the Environmental Issues and Community Liaison Division lead discussions on a Hudson's Bay blanket at the local pioneer village.

G-8. Another was a dewy meadow, where we consulted an environmental group about where we might plant trees on behalf of the G-8 delegates. We also met aboard a boat with representatives of a lake association, who pointed out environmentally sensitive areas along the shoreline.

The people of Huntsville came to know members of the SMO—and vice versa, though sometimes for less-than-subtle reasons. One patron at a favourite lunch spot referred to us as the “BlackBerry party.”

Focusing on youth engagement, we visited schools, held art contests and staged a “Model G-8” for 120 local high school students. They came well briefed on their positions and hammered out a communiqué. Ten of them will represent Muskoka as youth ambassadors at MY SUMMIT 2010, the G-8 youth summit that will bring 18- to 25-year-olds from each G-8 country to Muskoka to develop a communiqué to present to the G-8 leaders.

Managing logistics for the youth event is a huge responsibility, but it does have a few perks. How many DFAIT employees get to play nicer versions of *American Idol* judges for a day? That is what we did to select from 30 local musical acts that will perform at the MY SUMMIT closing concert.

We look forward to moving to Muskoka in the lead-up to the summit—we're sure it will come to feel even more like home.

Brett Thompson is an environment/outreach officer with the Environmental Issues and Community Liaison Division, and a native of Muskoka.



A dewy meadow is the site of consultations about where trees would be planted on behalf of the G-8 delegates.