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'Climate change is not a spectator sport': More than 200 meet in Naples to explore solutions



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In a region still reeling from Hurricane Ian, where climbing temperatures and rising seas regularly make headlines, it might seem climate change would be an easy-to-have community conversation.

Yet it's not.

As Noah Valenstein, former Florida Department of Environmental Protection secretary told those gathered Tuesday for the first SWFL Climate & Community Initiative Summit, there's no question the issues are urgent, but “Is urgency enough?” he asked.

The challenge? “The elephant in the room ... the environment still has that (cultural/political) divide,” he said.

The Naples gathering was an attempt to close the divide. The more than 200 attendees included government officials, community leaders, citizens, scientists, businesspeople and academics like Valenstein, who now teaches at Florida Gulf Coast University's Water School.

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As Hertz's Director of Social Responsibility Katie Leone told the crowd, "Climate change is not a spectator sport." Her corporation has been working hard to act responsibly in the "modern mobility ecosystem," by increasing use of electric vehicles and innovations like a partnership with Uber to help reduce its carbon footprint.

The summit featured a series of speakers followed by breakout tabletop sessions, where participants brainstormed solutions.

Ian was a big part of the day's discussions.

When FGCU Water School's Mike Savarese, speaking of the storm's remarkable surge and its impact on the coast said, "Lovers Key is a troubled island, and this particular storm may have done it in," the room gasped audibly. He also spoke about prediction technology – the good news is, it's effective and improving – and how it might be used to anticipate and plan for future hurricanes

Fort Myers Beach Councilman Bill Veach spoke about how his town is learning from Ian's aftermath, with slides showing older, hurricane-gutted (or destroyed) homes compared with buildings constructed to modern hurricane standards. "After this storm I'm completely sold on the modern building codes," he said.

Beyond the pain it caused, he expects Ian to act as an evolutionary force, pushing his island town to become more climate-efficient by adopting principles of the "15 minute city," a resident-friendly place where bicycles and pedestrian-accessible routes are embraced and "everybody is within 15 minutes of some commercial – retail, restaurants, whatever," Veach said. "And there's now an opportunity with planning to do some mixed use and encourage that."

Though Fort Myers Beach is still very car-dominated, he said, now that Ian cleared the slate, "We're trying to provide a pathway to be able to develop in a way that is favorable for the town going forward and that is doable for some of the smaller property owners."