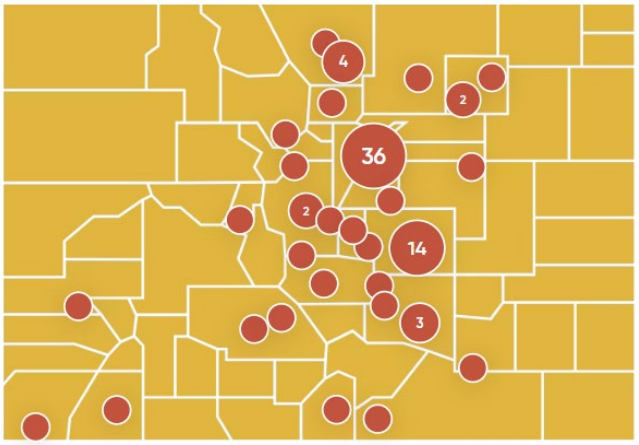
2026 Canopy Summit

Revitalizing Democracy, Reclaiming Civics

Impact Report

Overview

On May 21st-22nd, 150 attendees came from across the state for the 2026 Canopy Summit: Revitalizing Democracy, Reclaiming Civics. The summit is a bi-annual convening of civic leaders (both grassroots and grass tops) throughout the state from all different sectors. This year, the summit focused on how we can shore up our democracy by revitalizing our civic sphere. We explored how to reimagine our civic spaces into ones where all of us can decide on our future…together. Attendees came from over thirty different locations across the state, with a few even from outside Colorado.



Summit Learnings

Attendees had the opportunity to attend twenty different workshop sessions, six plenary sessions (aka "Home Room" sessions), eight play stations, and an evening documentary screening with filmmakers from the Youth Documentary Academy.

Play Stations

While many conferences feature both workshops and plenaries, the Canopy Summit offered play stations as a unique opportunity for attendees to engage in experiential activities during 30-minute breaks. This included opportunities like joining a drum circle as a way of discovering a common rhythm needed for collective action or participating in a longer tables dialogue to discover commonalities with people who think differently.

Home Room Sessions

Attendees gathered a full group for Home Room sessions as a space for shared learning. Karina Branson, from Conversketch, captured each of the Home Room sessions through graphic facilitation.

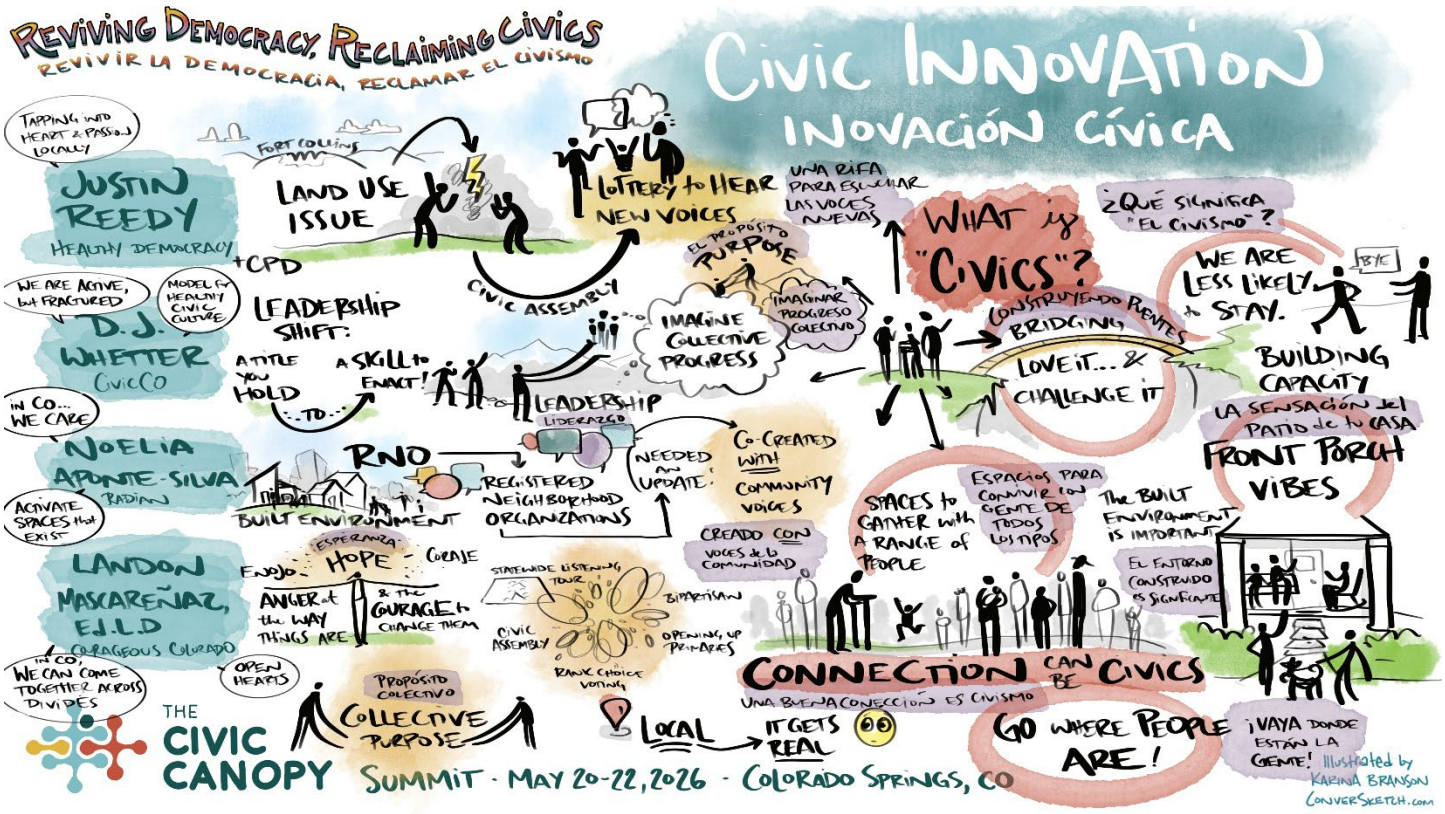
The summit began with an invitation from emcee, Kale McMonagle, to consider the places we've found a civic home as inspiration for the types of spaces we want to create.

Civic Innovation

To build on Colorado's current strengths, the second plenary session featured a Civic innovation panel with four speakers who are leading the way in refreshing our civic culture. The panel included:

- Justin Reedy's experience facilitating a jury for policy issues, known as Civic Assembly, in Fort Collins on the future design for the former Hugh's Stadium land
- D.J. Whetter's experience launching the Impact Forum, a space for civic leaders to move beyond dialogue into action
- Noelia Apponte-Silvia's experience redesigning Registered Neighborhood Organizations to facilitate real-time community policy co-creation

- Landon Mascareñaz's experience mobilizing Coloradoan's toward democratic reforms like open primaries and rank choice voting



Throughout this session, attendees reflected on how they saw Colorado's civic health using measures from Colorado State University's Civic Index. Overall, attendees scored Colorado's civic health in the middle, with the exception being a key strength around local leadership

driving community change. Attendees generated ideas for strengthening including building out urban and rural civic infrastructure, increasing inclusive co-creation of policy, reducing the influence of money on elections, engaging across differences, building out tools for public deliberation, aligning our political systems with our "purple" identity, and increasing opportunities for civic education especially amongst youth.

Designing Civic Hubs

During the next plenary, attendees joined in a fishbowl discussion to design the future of Colorado's civic spaces by exploring the idea of what civic hubs should look like. Based on work from Better Together America, emcee Kale McMonagle began with a framework for what a civic hub is and isn't.

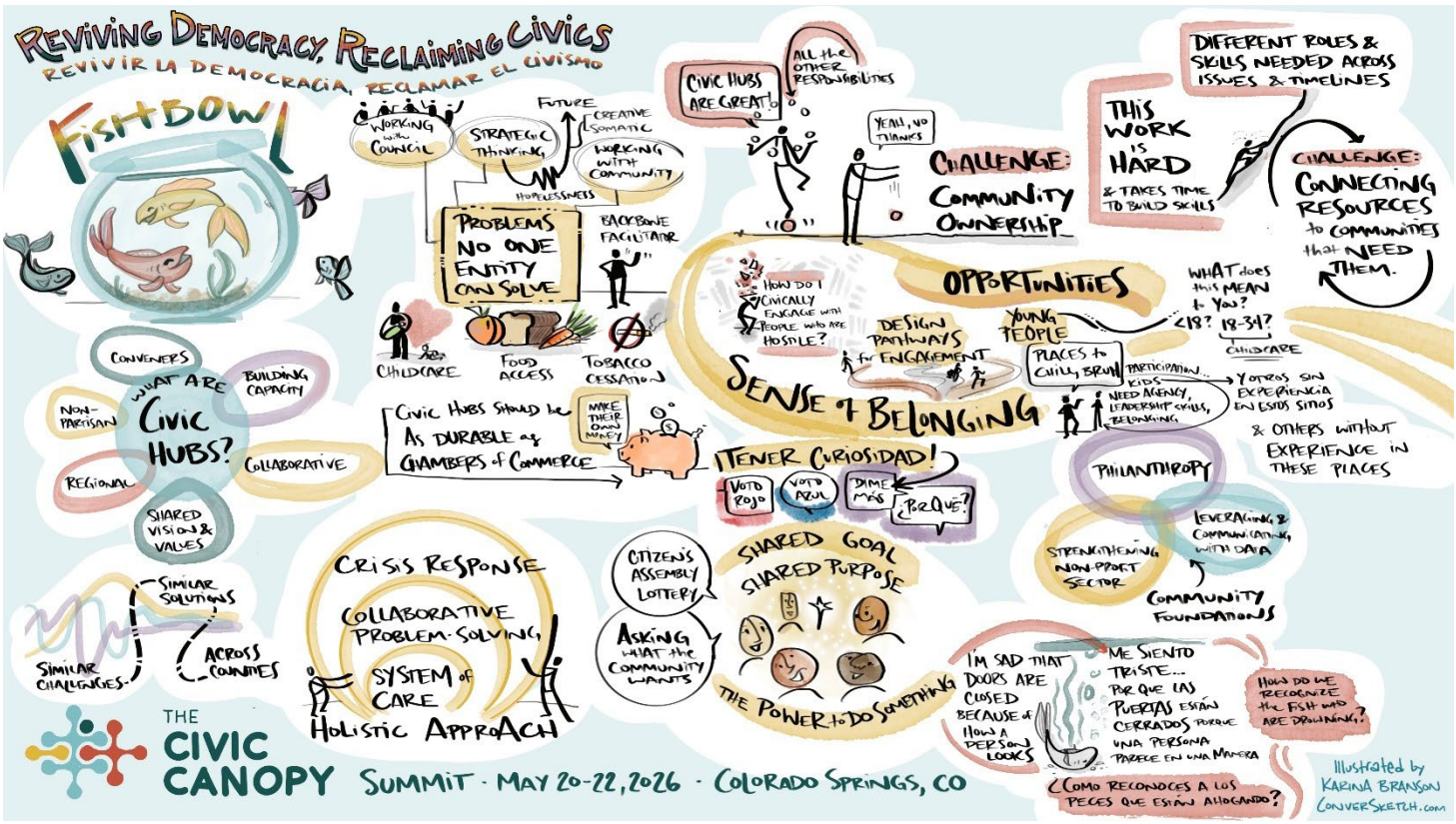
What is a Civic Hub?

A Civic Hub is comprised of people or organizations from a geographical region that builds collective capacity. A Civic Hub is based on a shared vision and shared values, is collaborative, and is responsive to the community in which it operates. Ideally, it is aimed at strengthening civic culture (not a single issue) and is cross-sector.

WHAT A CIVIC HUB IS	WHAT A CIVIC HUB ISN'T
Broad-based	Single issue
Nonpartisan, based on shared democratic values	Partisan, based on shared partisan ideologies
Collaborative, democratic, equitably co-created, and consensus-driven	Dominated by the agenda/leadership of a single person or organization
Range of democracy + civic health fields represented	Members are all from a single field
Sustainable with ongoing relationships	Single campaign with temporary/transactional relationships
Solutions-Oriented; practical	Purely theoretical; unrealistic
Local, Regional, or State	National
Community drives decisions/actions	Organizations drive decisions/actions
Accountable to the community	Accountable only to board members/donors
Mutual care	Self/organization-centered
Systems change over time	"Silver Bullet" approaches
Representative of the full community	Only represents a single group within the community
Includes local nonpartisan organizations, community leaders, and solutions journalists	Excludes local nonpartisan organizations, community leaders, and/or solutions journalists
Building community and civic capacity	Solely focused on policy change

The Fishbowl Discussion then began with Jacob Bornstein from Better Together America and leaders from organizations throughout the state who have committed to becoming civic hubs:

- Amber Ptak (Changeline)
- Jodie Riesenberger (Northern Colorado Community Foundation)
- Sue Boyett (United Way of Morgan County)
- Jason Medina (Community Foundation of the San Luis Valley)
- Houefa Akpamoli (United Way of Morgan County)
- Alejandro Salazar (Unify Montrose)
- Lynn Urban (TeamUp)
- Carlye Sayler (Lake County Build a Generation)



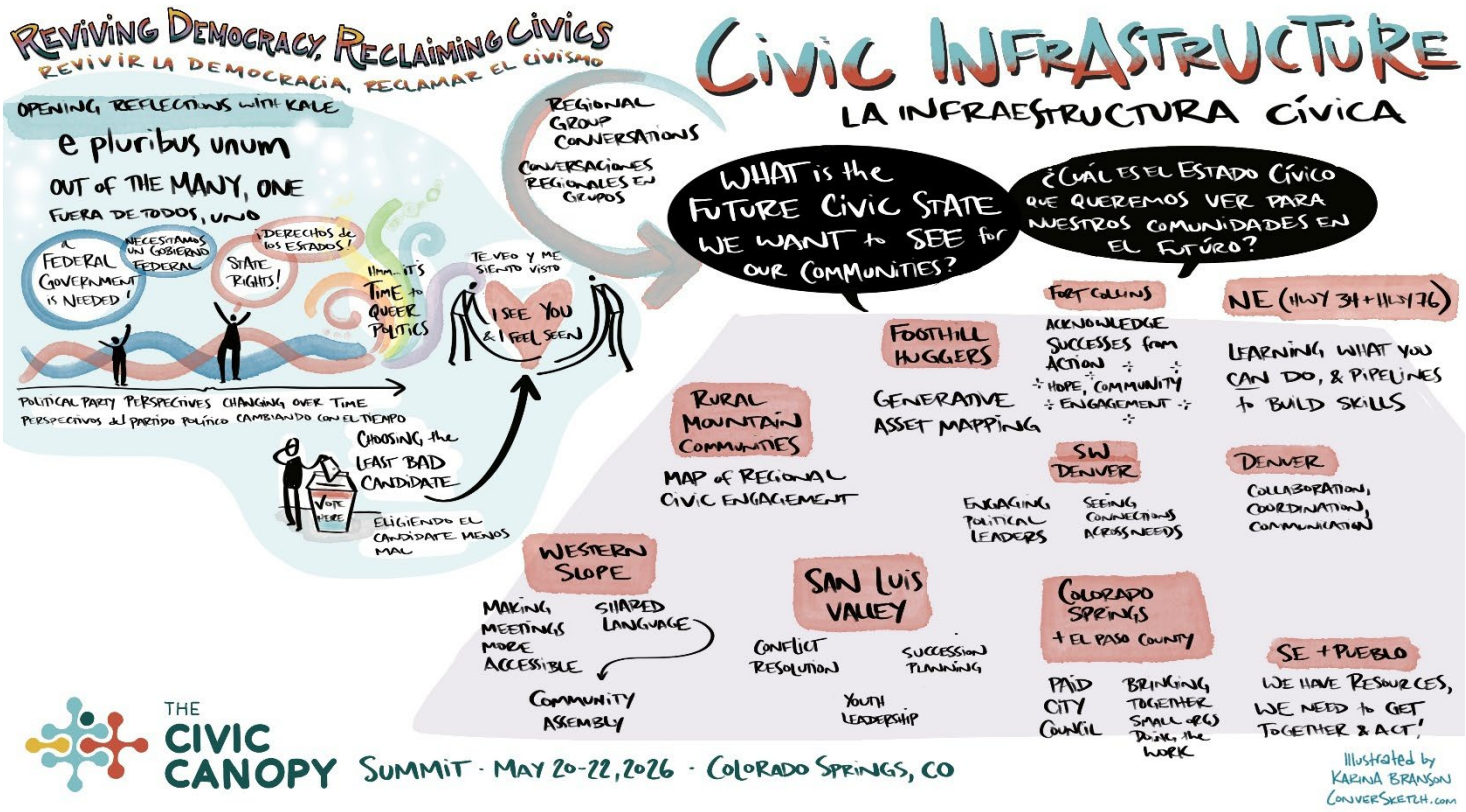
Participants talked about the opportunities for civic hubs, including creating spaces that foster the type of problem solving needed for complex issues that no one organization can address on their own. They talked about the numerous roles civic hubs needed to play from building a shared purpose for a community to building capacity for individual community members to work together. As more attendees joined the conversation, they talked about the

challenges hubs may face. At the center of this, folks shared their experiences in civic spaces where they weren't welcome or didn't feel like they belonged. Others imagined the sustainability challenges and called for civic hubs to have a financial model as durable as that of Chambers of Commerce.

Regional Infrastructure

At the beginning of day two, attendees broke out into groups by region, creating clusters that fit the region they most identified with. They zoomed into their region's specific strengths and challenges, before generating ideas for the future civic state they wanted to achieve and how they'd get there. Across the groups, key themes emerged:

REGION	TOP ASSET	TOP CHALLENGE	IMMEDIATE OPPORTUNITY
SW COLORADO	Rural navigability; tribal perspectives	Scarcity mindset; exclusionary processes	Civic hubs; decolonized meeting formats
SW DENVER	Coalition strength; cultural organizations	Trust deficit; immigrant community safety	Accountability structures; economic lens
SAN LUIS VALLEY	Relational trust; collaboration culture	Language injustice; youth involvement	Leadership pipeline; SLV hub alignment
BOULDER REGION ("FOOTHILL HUGGERS")	Civic engagement culture; green spaces	Segregation; policy-reality mismatch	Diversity-civic engagement connection
CENTRAL MOUNTAINS	Close-knit identity; existing civic activity	Scarcity/competition; isolation	Asset map; resource-sharing infrastructure
PIKES PEAK	Cross-party consensus; fluid coalitions	Urban sprawl; same-folks problem	Paid council roles; civic hubs
NE COLORADO	Language diversity; rural identity	Transportation; youth departure; language access	Multilingual engagement; education pathways
DENVER/METRO	Nonprofit density; coalition strength	Silos; competition; gentrification	Collective impact coordination; shared data



From this, a set of cross-cutting recommendation themes emerged:

Build Accessible Entry Points

Develop regional "civic on-ramp" programs – starting with communities that have existing civic appetite (Greeley, Ft. Morgan, SLV, SW Denver) but underdeveloped formal pathways. Consider: neighborhood-scale gatherings (community gardens, small gatherings as in Pikes Peak), trusted intermediaries (faith organizations, libraries, informal leaders), and multilingual outreach.

Invest in Civic Hubs

Pursue a statewide civic hub strategy with regional differentiation. In rural areas, hubs can be existing institutions (libraries, CSU Extension offices). In urban areas, new physical/virtual spaces for coordination are needed. Funding coordination across hubs – sharing resources, reducing duplication – is as important as the hubs themselves.

Develop Accessible Civic Language

Commission a participatory process to develop shared, plain-language vocabulary for civic engagement – co-created with communities most excluded by current language (Indigenous communities, immigrant communities, youth, Spanish-speaking communities). This should include reviewing and updating meeting formats (Roberts Rules alternatives) that reproduce exclusion.

Address the Economic-Civic Link

Integrate an explicit economic lens into civic programming. Support for childcare, translation, paid civic roles (e.g., paid city council positions as raised in Pikes Peak), and meeting times that accommodate shift workers are not peripheral – they are foundational to representative civic participation.

Invest in Leadership Development

Support succession planning and emerging leader development, particularly in rural and small-town regions. The San Luis Valley's call for "connector" roles, formal and informal, is a model. Target young people who are currently civic-ready but lack pathways, and communities where youth departure is depleting future civic capacity.

Repair Trust Through Accountability

In communities where civic fatigue is high (SW Denver, Denver/Metro), prioritize follow-through on commitments above all else. New engagement should begin with acknowledgment of past extractive processes, clear accountability structures, and concrete timelines for action on community input.

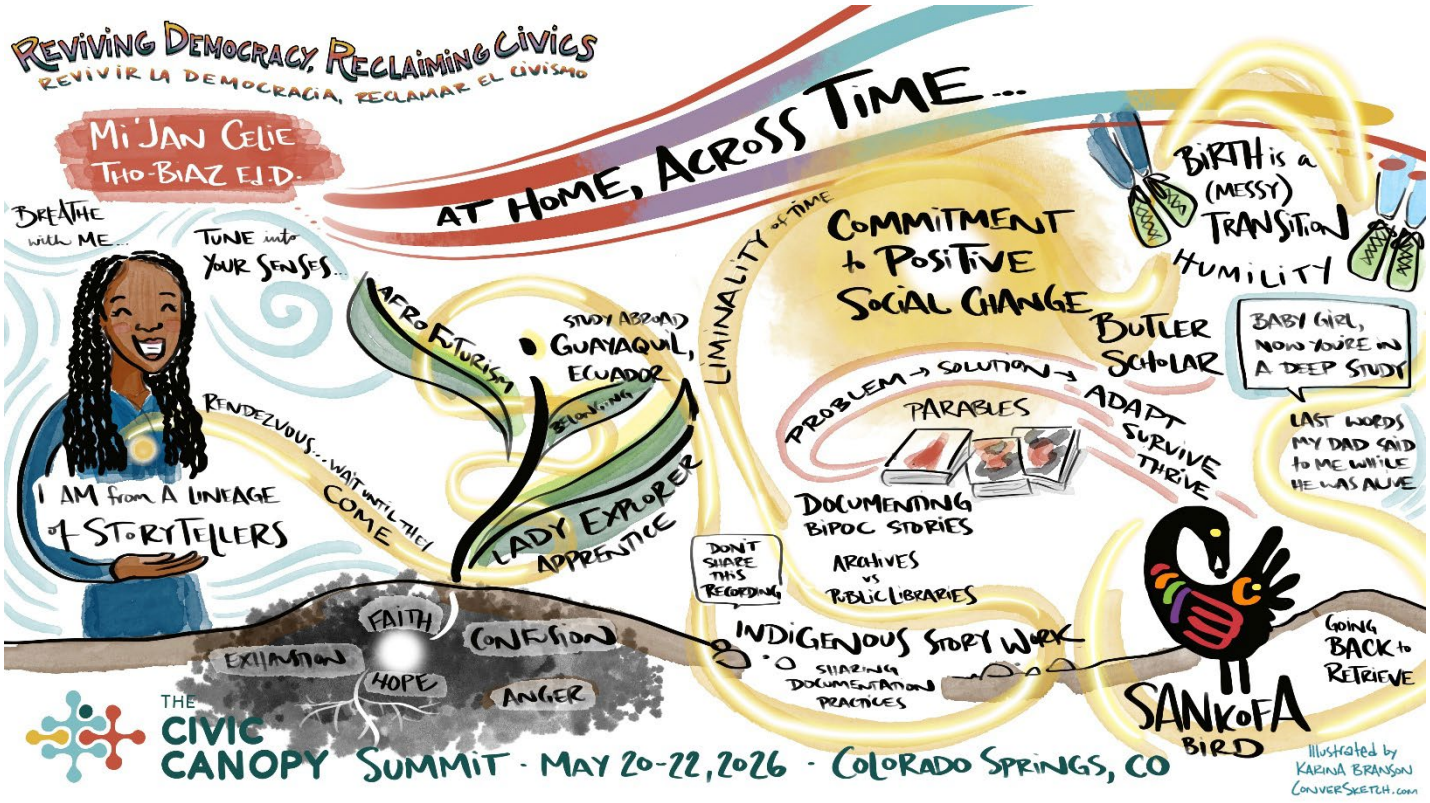
Cross-Regional Learning

Several regions (Central Mountains, SLV, Pikes Peak) are developing innovative models: the Estes Valley Nonprofit Network, Peoples Assembly concepts, civic hub structures, and generative asset mapping. Create intentional mechanisms for cross-regional learning – not just statewide convenings but structured peer exchange between regions facing similar challenges.

At Home, Across Time

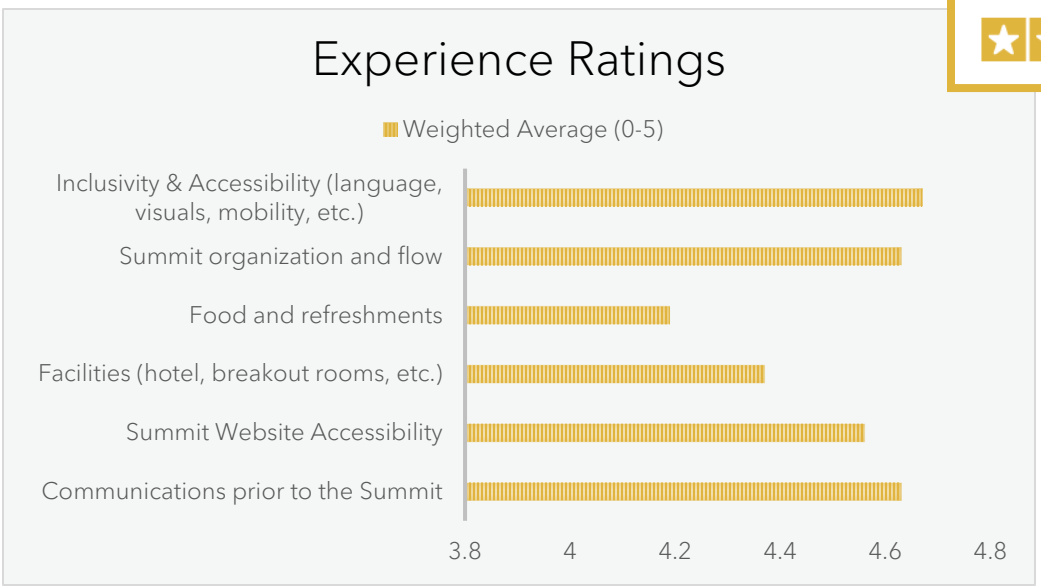
The summit culminated with a keynote from Mi'jan Celie Tho-Biaz, Kennedy Center Citizen Artist, America@250 Fellow, Documentarian, and Cultural Worker. Rooted in her work unpacking Octavia Butler's archives, Mi'jan explored the theme of liminality as way of helping attendees to navigate periods of uncertainty in our democracy. Octavia Butler's parables were just one example of a

Sankofa story. Based in the traditions of the Akan people in West Africa, the Sankofa bird symbolizes the need to go back in time to figure out our future.



Attendee Experience

Overall, attendees gave the summit 4.78 out of 5 stars. They ranked their likelihood to attend future Canopy events at 9.3 out of 10.



What summit attendees had to say:

- "It was such a wonderful feeling to be in community with such brilliant, creative, passionate and steadfast problem solvers and community builders. It was truly a gathering of the best of what Colorado has to offer when it comes to work and people who are moving the needle."

- "It was so inspiring being in the same room with so many kind, big-hearted people that are trying to make this a great state -- not just for some -- but for ALL"

- "Se manejo la conferencia con mucho profesionalismo. Te reciben desde el estacionamiento hasta las mesas donde se hizo la conferencia." [The conference was handled with great professionalism. You are greeted from the moment you arrive at the parking lot all the way to the tables where the conference took place.]

- "Walking into the Civic Canopy Summit felt a bit like finding home. I was surrounded by people I didn't even know I needed to meet... people asking important questions, doing meaningful work, and imagining what's possible together. The sessions challenged me to think differently, sparked new curiosity, and offered fresh ways of seeing the world and my place within it. What I think I appreciated most was the rare combination of feeling both seen and stretched. I could show up as myself while also being invited to question assumptions, explore new perspectives, and learn alongside others. I left feeling more connected, more curious, and more grounded in who I am and the work I want to be part of. That's a gift, and one I'm still carrying with me as I consider next right steps. :)"

- "What an amazing convening of civic-minded individuals and organizations. Gives me hope and helps me feel connected to the bigger work of fostering an informed and engaged community."

- "The Canopy Summit came at the right time for me, both personally and professionally. I left feeling energized by the opportunity to connect with people who care deeply about community impact, collaboration, and creating meaningful change. One of the most valuable parts of the experience was hearing diverse perspectives and learning practical ways to build stronger, more human-centered partnerships in my work. The Summit created space for honest conversations, thoughtful reflection, and genuine connection, which made it feel much more impactful than a typical conference."