

## The new Comox Valley Regional District responds to a changing world

by Peter Mitham

A new regional government in the Comox Valley — charged with developing a regional growth strategy — is setting an example for other regions through a collaborative public consultation process aimed at ensuring staff at the region's three municipalities and the region's rural residents have input regarding the Comox Valley's future. The result promises to be a unified planning structure for the regional and municipal governments, and a harmonized process for developers.



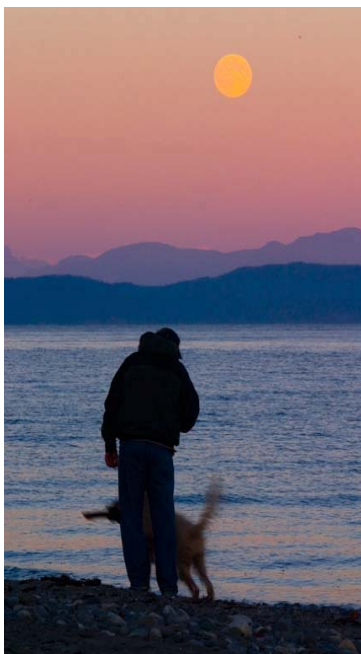
The Comox Valley's four local governments — the former Comox Strathcona Regional District, the Town of Comox, the City of Courtenay, and the Village of Cumberland — were already discussing a common growth strategy when the provincial government restructured the CSRD into two new entities, the [Comox Valley Regional District \(CVRD\)](#) and the [Strathcona Regional District](#), and mandated the CVRD to develop a regional growth strategy (RGS). The province set December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010 as the deadline to have the strategy developed and adopted. All subsequent CVRD bylaws will have to be consistent with the RGS once it is in place. Municipalities have up to two years to develop regional context statements that become part of their official community plans. The context statement explains the linkage between the municipality's local plan and the RGS.

A primary aim of the strategy was coordinating development policies so that the rapidly growing region could channel new development appropriately. The municipalities were also concerned about development beyond municipal boundaries, which previously occurred beyond anyone's direct control. The new mandate from the province gives the municipalities until 2010 to create a document with the potential to guide development in the region for generations to come.



Comox, BC

Chuck Russell photo



Goose Spit, Lazo North (Area B)  
Chuck Russell photo

CVRD chair Fred Bates, mayor of Cumberland since 2005, believes the [regional growth strategy](#) will complement the work that's already been done toward a sustainability strategy. While the growth strategy looks at local requirements, the district's [sustainability strategy](#) will link local concerns with global issues such as food security, climate change, and others.

"It's a way of the three municipalities and the regional district working together and seeking public input to design a strategy to deal with the potential future growth and the changing world," Bates says.

CVRD residents are no strangers to change. Bates' own municipality, Cumberland, is still reeling from the loss of the coal industry 40 years ago. Its municipal infrastructure now needs \$48-million in improvements to meet current needs, something the local tax base just can't support. It's hardly a sustainable situation. Bates doesn't expect the region's 60,000 people — let alone the 3,000 who live in Cumberland — to foot the bill, which means the solution will depend on sound management of both development and revenues.

"We're not going to be able to repair our infrastructure without, a) significant commercial or industrial development and, b) a change in the way government manages taxes," Bates says.

The situation in Cumberland has its parallels elsewhere in the region, which the [Comox Valley Investment Corp.](#) estimates will more than double to 142,000 by 2030.



*Courtenay, BC*

*Chuck Russell photo*

“We can’t manage people’s right to have children or to move here; we need to manage how we’re going to react to that,” Bates said. “We need to make sure when people come to Comox Valley they have a good supply of good, clean drinking water. We can deal with sewage, we can deal with transportation, we can deal with health care issues etc. And it doesn’t matter which boundary they’re in.”

The challenges facing the CVRD are unique, says Mark Holland, a consultant with the planning firm of [HB Lanarc](#) who drafted a white paper on sustainability issues for the region’s municipalities last winter. He’s now working on the region’s sustainability strategy.

Holland explains that since much of the regional district’s 1,700 square kilometers lie outside municipal boundaries, developers have typically opted to locate in the unincorporated areas. This robs the municipalities of the development cost charges that help support municipal infrastructure development. It’s also starting to have an impact on development. Holland expects access to water will figure prominently in the strategy documents because of constraints on supplies in the valley.

“A number of larger development projects have either been stalled or stopped over disagreements or over the inability to have water to be able to make the growth occur,” Holland says. Comox Lake is the district’s main water supply, but water supplies closer to the valley floor are more difficult to access, limiting development. To pay for the infrastructure required to access, treat, and distribute a steady water supply, public funds are needed.

Despite the challenges, Holland believes the framework exists to ensure a satisfactory strategy emerges from the discussions. The first public consultation as part of the sustainability process was held October 2, and when the process wraps up in a year the draft document will go to the municipalities for comment.



*Puntledge, Black Creek (Area C)*

*Chuck Russell photo*

“Anything that people don’t feel they really had a chance to co-author during the public process, we’ll have a chance to work out the details on that with each one of those jurisdictions individually and separately afterwards,” Holland says, quipping: “That’s our insurance plan.”



*Cumberland, BC*

In the meantime, local governments are priming themselves to act on the plan. The initial discussions held by the municipalities prior to the CVRD’s formation led to a set of common principles for addressing new development proposals.

“Everyone’s in agreement as to what those policies generally look like,” said Sandy Gray, chief administrative officer for Courtenay. “We’re going to require the development industry to demonstrate those to us on any application coming forward.”

The current process will formalize that agreement with the input of the public to determine the exact policies that will guide the application of the region’s shared vision. Gray notes that Courtenay is entrenching sustainable principles in both urban planning and purchasing, and expects the valley to be a leader in the area when the regional growth strategy is complete.

Working together toward that common goal is important, Bates says, because the issues facing the valley aren't limited to one municipality. It's also why the district is continuing with its sustainability strategy in addition to following through on the province's requirement for the regional growth strategy; a regional strategy is important for managing local growth, but local growth is also impacted by broader concerns.

"We need to come together as a valley to work towards long-term solutions to react to growth and to a changing world. And we need to do that in a respectful, cooperative way that doesn't attempt to put one community, one area, one idea away ahead of everybody else," Bates says. "The solution will impact all of us, regardless of boundary."

#### *Further Reading*

[A Sustainable Development Strategy for the Comox Valley](#) (January 2008)

[A White Paper on Regional Growth Management](#) (February 2008)

[Sustainability Strategy Project Updates](#)

*Peter Mitham is a real estate columnist for Business in Vancouver (www.biv.com), and co-author of Real Estate Investing for Canadians for Dummies (2006). His next book, The Canadian Landlord's Guide, will be published in early 2009.*