



UNDERSTANDING OUR CHOICES

NOVEMBER 2009

This brief summarizes the feedback that we received on the Regional Growth Strategy background paper *Understanding our Choices*. The purpose of the background paper was to set up the key issues that the Regional Growth Strategy will address:

Housing & Affordability
Local Economic Development
Transportation
Agriculture & Food Security
Parks & Natural Areas
Regional Services
Public Health & Safety
Climate Change

Following an overview and discussion of each of these issues, the four conceptual growth approaches were presented. The report was released in June 2009 with a series of public open houses. The report was posted on the project website and available in hard copy through the Regional District and the local libraries. Residents of Comox Valley were asked to provide feedback on the findings in the background paper and the approaches to growth. September 15, 2009 was set as the final day to receive feedback.

In addition to the feedback received at the round of public open houses in June, we received comments from 24 private interest groups including residents, developers, local associations and non-profits.

As expected in a Valley of diverse residents and interests, there are, at times, competing visions and goals when it comes to planning for the long-term. However, there was one point that ran throughout and was agreed to by all: ***the Comox Valley is a beautiful place and that protecting the natural environment must be the priority in any long-term planning.***

We would like to thank everyone who has participated and shared their experiences and wisdom with us throughout this process so far. The next step is to draft the Regional Growth Strategy policies and the Approach to Growth, which will be available for comment in November 2009.

The following offers a summary of the feedback that we heard. The summary has been arranged by topic area and attempts to capture the breadth of responses that we received. The full submissions are also available for review on the project website.

Housing & Affordability

- Overall there is a need for affordable housing types and tenures in the Comox Valley. There are 250 people defined as absolutely homeless with 3,100 people at risk of becoming homeless (2006). There should be a regionally consistent affordable housing policy.
- Affordable housing should be addressed through allowing secondary suites and incentives for developers such as waiving DCCs, additional density and reducing amenities requirements etc.
- While some people saw the housing start numbers as an indication that there is an adequate supply of housing in the Comox Valley over the next twenty years, others found this to be an unreliable method for determining future supply of housing given that these projects are at varying levels of certainty.
- Responses from developers were to allow the market to determine the types of housing built over the long-term.
- Although condos and higher density housing is good for infill in urban areas, it was noted that people move the Comox Valley for the rural character, not an urban one.
- There needs to be a balance between providing different housing types and tenures through government policy direction but also responsive to the market.

Local Economic Development

- General agreement that attention needs to be turned toward 'green industry' both attracting and retaining this industry.
- Concern that the resource industries and associated labourers are losing jobs.
- The real estate development and construction industries are a significant contributor to the local economy and this was not highlighted enough in the background paper.
- To encourage more development, streamlining the development process was suggested by a number of development companies. This would include amalgamating the local government planning departments to create more ease through consistency in the development application process.

Transportation

- General agreement that we need to move away from reliance on the private automobile.
- In the urban areas creating a greater mix of uses with higher density was generally acceptable and seemed feasible however in the rural areas public transit was seen as less feasible.
- To increase alternative modes of transportation in the rural areas there needs to be more rural-oriented public transit amenities such as bike hubs where people can ride to, change, have a coffee, read the paper and then catch a bus. Other services, public and private, such as 'call and reserve' are oriented toward less population rural areas.
- Green 'electric' cars should also be planned for within the road and building infrastructure (recharge outlets, slower lanes etc).

Agriculture & Food Security

- General agreement that the ALR boundaries need to be reinforced with strong buffers.
- General agreement that agriculture is a key economic driver in the Comox Valley and needs to be encouraged through the promotion of local food.
- The suggested 8ha of agriculture land in the background report was not well-received, rather it was thought that there should be allowances for smaller parcels to provide a range of agricultural options (small farm intensive and larger farming).
- “Spill-over effect” from the Comox Valley Farmer’s Market is underestimated and the annual economic impact of additional spending in stores close to the market \$1,117,700 combining Saturday and Wednesday markets.

Parks & Natural Areas

- General consensus that the natural environment needed to be the priority in future growth planning and land use considerations for the Comox Valley.
- General support for conservation strategies set out in the Nature without Borders report.
- General support that there needs to be more mapping and identification of Sensitive Ecosystem Areas within the Comox Valley with a central depot for storing this information.
- While some people preferred waiting until all SEAs were identified before going forward with any development, others thought that this process would take too long and that SEA ground-truthing should be part of the development application process.

Regional Services

- Water supply is a key issue for residents of the Comox Valley. There is general concern that the carrying capacity of water is not being factored into future growth considerations.
- General support for water conservation methods such as water-metering, requiring grey-water systems in new developments and providing incentives to retrofit older buildings.
- In the Comox Valley failing septic systems are a big health issue with 20 years being the general life expectancy of these types of systems.
- Issue between municipalities and Electoral Areas when it comes to water and sewer servicing provision and the process that is necessary for urban boundary extensions.
- Concern around protection of the Comox Lake Watershed- an unprotected watershed.

Public Health & Safety

- General consensus that a healthy, active lifestyle is in the best interest of residents of Comox Valley and that this lifestyle can be promoted through better bike and pedestrian infrastructure.
- Fire safety protection should be extended to at-risk areas.

Climate Change

- While the background chapter focused primarily on mitigation strategies that can be addressed through RGS policies, there needs to be more focus on adaption strategies. Adaptation strategies include planning for rising sea levels, increasing fire protection to forested areas and planning for periods of drought and erratic climates in general.

Approaches to Growth

- The preferences for the Approaches to Growth varied. Most residents preferred Approach 1 with tight, compact growth in the existing urban areas while retaining the strong rural character with working resource lands. However, submissions from developer representatives favoured Approaches 3 and 4 which supports more flexibility in where growth occurs. Everyone agreed that Sensitive Ecosystem Areas should be protected first, however Approaches 3 and 4 would then be free to take place outside of these protected areas with fewer regulations.
- It was also noted that Comox Valley should not be seen as a hard line between the urban and the rural but rather as the rural/urban interface recognizing that there are distinct rural characteristics and distinct urban characteristics.