

BRIEFING NOTE: ADDRESSING THE FLAWS OF THE RDN REGIONAL GROWTH STRATEGY

The Issue

Over 15 years ago the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) and its member municipalities responded to the concerns of citizens and elected officials about uncontrolled growth in the region and deteriorating quality of life. The RDN initiated a planning process that held out the promise of containing urban sprawl, preserving the character of rural communities, protecting the natural environment, controlling the ever increasing costs of servicing new development, and creating a vibrant sustainable economy. We commend the RDN for bringing growth and sustainability issues to the forefront and encouraging community input to these important issues.

In 1997, the RDN adopted a regional growth strategy. This document has since evolved into a vision for a sustainable region, accompanied by a strategic plan developed by the RDN's Board of Directors that makes building sustainable communities an overarching priority. In 2008, the RDN initiated a review of its Regional Growth Strategy (RGS), involving citizens in determining what changes should be made "to better support the regional district's goals policies and actions regarding its vision for a sustainable future."

The RDN derives its definition of sustainability from the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report "as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs." While the regional district has expanded this definition to acknowledge that our economy and society ultimately depend on the environment for the resources to support human needs, it is fundamentally flawed because—unlike the complete original definition—it fails to recognize the limits of the natural environment to meet those present and future needs.

Why Growth Management is Not the Answer

One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The 2008 backgrounder to the Regional Growth Strategy Review, "An Assessment of Regional Growth Management Related Challenges and Opportunities" clearly shows that repeatedly drawing and redrawing lines on a map has done little to move the region towards its urban containment, nodal structure, environmental protection, efficient servicing, rural integrity and, most importantly, its overall sustainability goals.

The major challenge of the Regional Growth Strategy over the past 15 years has been finding the political will to implement its policies. In fact, residents and taxpayers of the region are told, "while there is support for the broader region-wide goals stated in the RGS, the specific actions necessary to implement these goals have not been taken." The 2006 State of Sustainability Report for the region demonstrates by its own benchmarks that the Regional Growth Strategy has not achieved most of its goals.

Why Growth Management is Not the Answer (Cont'd)

Citizens entrust their local governments with protecting and preserving their quality of life and those of future generations. To date, with a few notable exceptions such as the Regional Parks and Trails Plan, recycling rates, and the improved quality of biosolids from sewage treatment plants, the RDN and its municipal partners have made little progress in attaining the goals of the Regional Growth Strategy. Here is what the 2006 and 2008 background reports conclude:

- Our population is growing faster *outside* Urban Containment Boundaries than in the areas designated for growth;
- Regional open spaces, forest lands, and other natural areas continue to be converted to other uses and many environmentally sensitive areas are not protected;
- Transit ridership remains low, and per capita use of automobiles, the major source of greenhouse gas emissions, is on the rise;
- Water consumption has grown faster than the growth in population, leaving insufficient water resources for residents and wildlife, with many areas identified for growth having no sustainable source of water; and
- Demand for services to manage our liquid and solid waste continues to outstrip the planned capacity of waste treatment infrastructure, placing another heavy burden on taxpayers, residents, and the environment.

Time for a True Commitment to Sustainability

If the RDN and its member municipalities are serious about building a sustainable region, it's time the Regional Growth Strategy acknowledged that we can't grow forever. Most of the challenges facing our region – from the deteriorating state of our natural environment, to climate change, to unaffordable housing and infrastructure costs – are symptoms of an economy and a society based on ever increasing per-capita consumption, population, and economic growth.

The first step in making a real commitment to sustainability is understanding and building an awareness of the physical laws and ecological principles that govern sustainability and choosing to live within those limits. It is insincere and misleading to speak of sustainable development in the context of quantitative economic growth when according to latest scientific evidence our collective ecological footprints have already exceeding the world's carrying capacity by more than 25 %.

The RDN claims “to have taken a leadership role amongst its peers in BC in pursuing sustainable approaches to growth and development and remains committed to continuing along this path.” This assertion is both deceptively attractive and self-serving, when only one of its municipalities—Qualicum Beach—has implemented a cap on its future population through its Official Community Plan.

About The Qualicum Institute

The Qualicum Institute is a registered not-for-profit society in British Columbia. It was formed to educate the public on the principles and practices of ecological, social, and economic sustainability.



A society for ecological, economic, and social sustainability

Time for a True Commitment to Sustainability (Cont'd)

Peak oil and climate change will soon cause major impacts to the quality of life of residents of the regional district. It is unrealistic and unwise to continue to expect other regions to supply our basic food and energy needs, when their ecosystems and resources are already at or over capacity. We must act now to establish what we will need locally to become self-sufficient in meeting our basic needs and balance those needs with our region's ability to regenerate renewable resources and assimilate our wastes.

Recommendations:

As part of the Regional Growth Strategy Review, the RDN and its municipal partners should implement actions that will put it on the path to becoming a true leader in building sustainable communities. The following recommendations are examples of such actions:

1. Place a moratorium on further growth within the RDN to protect the health and welfare of its citizens in anticipation of the effects of peak oil and global climate disruption, until we can determine why the Regional Growth Strategy has failed to adopt and implement policies that will lead to sustainability. Growth should continue only if it can be demonstrated that the approach of the Regional Growth Strategy has the ability to maintain in the long-term, more than our current population and also protect the ecosystems on which we depend.
2. Research the physical and ecological limits that set the stage for sustainability and educate our elected officials and citizens about what we can and can't do if we are going to choose to be sustainable.
3. Establish a clear definition of sustainability based on scientific principles. Ensure that the definition is written in plain language that will form the foundation of a Regional Growth Strategy. Sustainability as a concept has its roots in the science of ecology, which is the study of the relationship and balance between a species, its activities, and its environment. Based on that, the Qualicum Institute definition of sustainability is: *Our long-term social and economic well-being requires that we strive to live in a just and equitable way. One that ensures the viability and subsistence of all living species and their natural places. This means choosing to live within the limits of ecological sustainability, which is the maintenance of fundamental processes so that the biological productivity of the Earth endures without dependence on non-renewable resources.* If you do something sustainably you can do it forever; most of what we're doing in the RDN today is not sustainable.
4. Determine the amount of food, water, energy, and other needs our regional ecosystems and resources can supply to support a given population while still maintaining the health and functions of those ecosystems including the health of the other living organisms dependent upon them.
5. Research, adopt, and implement policies to establish a steady state economy in the RDN, an economy that is in balance with our region's and our global ecosystems (see the Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy: <http://www.steadystate.org/Index.html>)

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