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Democracy is more than just voting

Neil Dawe, Special to Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, November 24, 2008

Change was the buzzword during the two-year, U.S. presidential election campaign. And real change occurred when America voted in Barack Obama, who will soon become the country's first African-American president.

Two weeks after the U.S. election, Oceanside voters went to the polls and another municipal election became history. The voters in Parksville wanted change while Qualicum Beach voters chose to stay the course.

Our civic duty done, we returned to our normal life. Three years from now we'll once again exercise our democratic right and return to the booth to mark our ballots. But democracy is more than voting once every few years.

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Voting is important, of course; at least if you want some say in your community's future. Yet many of us today apparently don't see its value: just over half (55%) of the eligible Qualicum Beach voters turned out on election night, down from 64% in 2005. In Parksville voter turnout was only 43% but better than the paltry 29% turnout in 2005.

And change is more than just voting in new faces to council. Real change occurs when citizens participate in community decisions throughout the year. Attending a developer's information session or writing the odd letter to the editor is only part of the story. Actions such as joining community organizations, organizing neighbourhood meetings, attending council meetings, or meeting with councilors are equally important.

For example, many people still complain about the two towers rising from Parksville's beautiful waterfront. Some attended information sessions, voiced opinions to council, or wrote letters. Many, however, didn't say a thing at the time, waiting to speak out only after the development was underway. Now the towers protrude – a lasting monument to our failure to protect what is best about our community.

It didn't have to be that way. Look back to another story about development of our waterfront.

In 1990, Victoria's Swiftsure Developments brought forward a development proposal for the property then known as the Parksville Flats. The developer requested rezoning to build a large condo project on the Englishman River estuary's western spit and parts of the forested area.

For years conservation organizations had been trying to protect the Englishman River estuary. I recall walking the estuary with world-renowned conservationist Roderick Haig-Brown and the Arrowsmith Naturalists in the mid-1970s. The Pacific Estuary Conservation Program tried to buy this sensitive property just before its purchase by Swiftsure.

When news of this proposed development got out, community groups and individuals acted immediately. The Friends of the Parksville Flats (FoF) formed and began a campaign to protect this rare and productive ecosystem. They held information sessions.

At the first session, as habitat manager for Environment Canada, I recall discussing the importance of estuaries, their values and the significance of having such a natural asset on Parksville's front door.

The FoF later organized a march on city hall that drew over 200 people. A march on city hall! In Parksville! A good cross-section of the community participated, including members of the business community. A front-page photo in the community newspaper showed the crowd waving their placards. Featured front and centre was the wife of the Vice President of the Chamber of Commerce.

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Another group, The People Who Care, practiced civil disobedience to have their concerns heard. They camped in the adjacent Community Park to keep an eye on the site. They even stood in front of dump trucks to prevent them from accessing the spit.

The Mid Island Wildlife Watch Society, busy preparing for the first Brant Festival, worked behind the scenes and, together with Chamber of Commerce members, raised support to try to protect the estuary.

In August of 1990, Parksville council met in the old community hall to hear final comments before voting on the development proposal. Despite the community uproar, six councilors split the vote, leaving the mayor to decide the outcome.

The mayor, Paul Reitsma, chose to vote against the proposal. This paved the way for conservation organizations to acquire all but

the estuary's marine spits. The Nature Trust of BC, with support from its federal and provincial partners, finally conserved much of the Englishman River estuary.

That's one example of how our local citizens worked together to protect an iconic ecosystem. Today, these conservation lands add much to the character and quality of life of Parksville.

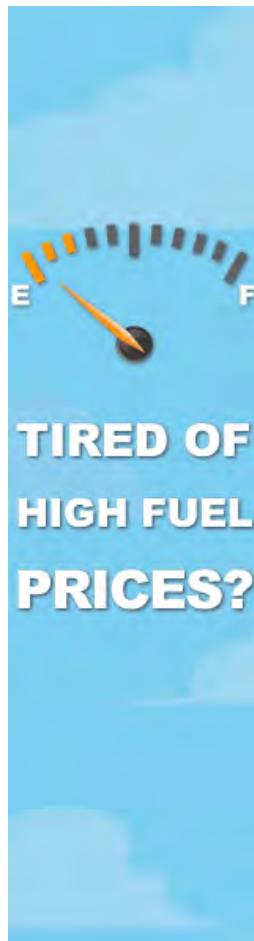
We will need a similar community spirit to make the change from a society dependent on declining oil reserves to one fueled by sustainable energy sources. Greater civic involvement will be crucial if we hope to buffer the effects of increased drought and higher summer temperatures resulting from global climate change.

California's Governor has already ordered his state to prepare for rising sea levels caused by global warming. We need forward thinking leaders to start preparing for similar impacts to our community. Our portion of the coastline has moderate, not low, sensitivity to sea level increases, according to Natural Resources Canada.

The ability to plan and prepare for an uncertain future requires changing our hotel guest mentality. We need to tap into the collective genius of our citizenry to build a community resilience that will buffer us from outside events, such as the current financial crisis. We can start by becoming more self-sufficient. Using the principles of sustainability will help ensure sufficient food, water, shelter, and energy for us all.

Our willingness to join in a common cause is what represents real change in our community, not just changing the faces around a council table. Imagine the vibrant culture we could build together by pooling our local skills and resources. It's what the First Nations did for thousands of years before contact. It's what John Hirst and his family did when they first settled on the banks of the Englishman River 130 years ago. It's what we can do today.

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