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Townfolk voted to borrow millions for a park

Neil Dawe, Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, September 01, 2008

Parksville's Resident Satisfaction Survey conducted this past June showed that residents were least satisfied with services related to land use, planning, and zoning issues. This may not be surprising, considering the connection between the costs of servicing new developments and the projected tax increases of 5% for the next five years.

Council hopes that the tax increases, plus the deferral of some major capital projects over the same period, will enable the City to avoid a deficit of around \$3 million by 2013 projected to occur if business-as-usual continues.

Even with the deferral of the capital projects and the decision not to fill two additional staff positions, the City still plans for an additional planning clerk, an IT technician and two additional RCMP members by 2012. The new firehall is factored into this provisional budget but not the new water treatment facility and water intake that is scheduled for 2015 at an estimated cost to the City of \$27 million.

Are all these costs necessary? Perhaps. I wouldn't want to gamble my house, for example, on getting a necessary fire truck to our neighbourhood from the Industrial Park, some eight minutes away, when it could be here in half the time from the new firehall, when it's completed.

But perhaps a better question is, "Were all these costs necessary and can they be

avoided in the future?"

The City of Bloomington, Indiana and Greenwich, Rhode Island found out when they looked at the costs of residential growth on community services.

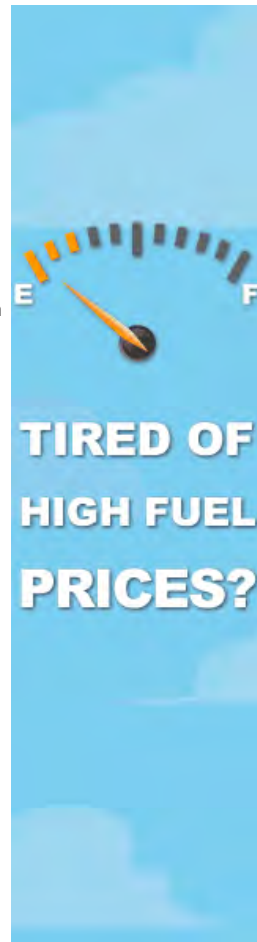
In most communities, including Parksville, the impacts of growth are basically assumed to be positive. As a result, the costs associated with growth are seldom quantified or even considered.

Bloomington, with a population of over 120,000, discovered that making the assumption growth is beneficial was unwise without conducting a cost-benefit analysis. The common myth that increasing the tax base will lead to a smaller per-capita tax burden was emphasized. Indeed, study after study has consistently shown that the increased population provides less revenue than the infrastructure costs needed to accommodate the additional residential growth. Sound familiar?

The cost ratios of servicing developments found in these studies range between 1.15 and 1.50. This means that for every tax dollar collected, a community can spend \$1.15 to \$1.50 in costs for community services, a shortfall of between 15 and 50 percent. As new homes are built, greater gaps between the infrastructure costs and taxpayer revenues are created, resulting in ever-increasing tax rates.

In addition, the increasing costs associated with new growth are born by all taxpayers, while the new development and the developer reap virtually all the benefits.

West Greenwich, Rhode Island, a town of just over 5,000 people, conducted a similar study on the costs of growth to their small town. They discovered that for every dollar per acre they collected, they spent \$1.46 per acre for residential use compared with \$0.46 per acre for open space and parklands.



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This cost-benefit information helped chart the town's future development. West Greenwich politicians worked together with the community to balance growth with the town's rural heritage. In the end, working with partners such as the Nature Conservancy, the town was asked to vote on an \$8-million bond issue to cover their share of the costs of acquiring over 660 hectares (1,600 acres) of open space habitat within the town boundaries.

The community, fully informed by the cost-benefit analysis of growth, voted 53-1 in favour of the bond issue. What they were really voting for was maintenance of their rural character and quality of life. Today, 47% of the town lands are conserved as natural ecosystems and open space.

The townspeople readily understood that the \$75 average increase in taxes resulting from the bond issue was considerably less than the ongoing and increasing costs that would have been associated with a 168-unit housing development that had been proposed for part of the open space lands.

We need this kind of reality check in our communities on Vancouver Island. Under our unachievable, infinite growth paradigm, we're rapidly losing the very values which give us our special quality of life. Agricultural and forested lands are continuously under threat and the ecological values of the relatively few natural areas within our communities are insidiously eroded by the growth.

A somewhat disconcerting result from the Parksville survey is that only 4% of respondents thought that protection of resources and natural areas (ecosystems) is an important issue facing the City. Those results are quite telling, if only because natural areas are the real foundation of our social well-being and a healthy economy.

Until we reach a new level of understanding, and act to conserve the wild lands on which we all depend, we'll no doubt continue to pay more and more of our hard-earned monies for an increasingly reduced quality of life. It's a question of priorities that perhaps we should consider when deciding who we will vote for in the upcoming civic elections.

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