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Stop future growth until we figure out what's sustainable

Roy Ostling, Oceanside Star
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A couple of weeks ago Parksville's elected officials reached a disturbing conclusion. Accommodating ever-increasing development is putting the community's infrastructure and financial and environmental resources at risk.

As Mayor Sandy Herle observed, the city is close to having more development than it wants or can afford, concluding "our carrying capacity has reached its max."

What's surprising is that it has taken past and present Parksville councilors so long to openly debate the consequences of unlimited growth.

The assumption that increased development benefits existing residents by increasing the tax base has been discredited since at least the mid-1980s. Research by the American Farmland Trust has shown that on average every dollar in tax revenue generated by residential development incurs \$1.15 in costs for public services. Compare that with farm or forest land that requires only 36 cents servicing costs for every dollar paid in property taxes.

Despite development cost charges (DCCs), Parksville taxpayers could be on the hook for more than \$13 million in new debt by 2016, much of that to provide roads, water and sewer infrastructure for new subdivisions. And DCCs can't be used to pay for a host of other services affected by growth, such as landfill costs, police, fire and recreation.

If Parksville council is worried about the financial implications of out-of-control growth, the long-term environmental and quality-of-life impacts could be even more concerning. Maintaining our current standard of living requires 6.1 global hectares per person, or the equivalent of 91 average city lots. On a regional scale our ecological footprint is nearly one-third the size of Vancouver Island. The more we grow, the less sustainable we become.

So what can be done to restore the balance between the financial, environmental and resource capacities of our communities?

A first step would be considering a moratorium on future growth until the carrying capacity of the community is determined and sustainable planning policies are implemented.

Much can be learned from other jurisdictions. Communities such as Noosa Shire in Australia have set a population cap based on the carrying capacity of their region. In Canada, the Halifax Regional Municipality successfully implemented a moratorium on development to enable it to develop and implement a plan for regional sustainability. Across the U.S., citizen initiatives have resulted in growth moratoriums and in California these measures have resulted in about 13% of its cities putting housing caps in place.

The challenge of setting limits to growth and learning to live within them isn't an easy one. But one would think experiencing the consequences of a growing tax burden, continued resource depletion, and environmental degradation would spur citizen action. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, this is far from the case.

In the last municipal election, fewer than 29% of eligible Parksville voters cast a ballot. And citizen participation in the recent Regional Growth Strategy has been sadly lacking. Just over half a per cent of the region's households have responded to the "Shaping Our Future" survey and less than 100 residents participated in recent workshops.

What's encouraging is that Parksville council and other local elected officials are now recognizing the "grow to thrive" model of development isn't working and are seeking a sustainable solution. Now it's up to us to do our part by getting informed and showing our support.

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