



Campbell River
1st September 2010

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the participants, note takers and our facilitator Harold Rhenisch for allowing an honest, open and interesting conversation to take place about the opportunities for our communities and our province.

This report is an effort to capture those ideas, to share them with participants and with people who were invited but who were unable to attend. Hopefully individuals and organisations, businesses and governments at all levels will take some of these ideas forward and will incorporate them in their thinking.

Introduction

We are living in a dramatic time. Our small part of this planet can play a significant part in the continuing evolution of our society if we are truly willing to work together to address our challenges. We are facing climate change; we know we can no longer rely on fossil fuels; the certainties in which we grounded our lives are changing. The economic foundation which had been thought so strong was badly shaken two years ago and for many areas there is huge uncertainty about our common future.

We have within our selves and within our communities, the ability to make change: we can make life better for people now and for the generations to come without further jeopardising the environment. If we care about the place in which we live and work, we have an obligation to act.

We need to work together, across traditional boundaries to make those changes. We need to hear from all parts of our society about their priorities. Our Province Our Future is a province wide series of conferences hosted by the Official Opposition to engage debate and to draw an environmental, economic, social and cultural road map; this report will be part of that growing picture.

Scene

The conference invitation list was focussed on the communities with make up the Strathcona Regional District: from Cortes Island in the east to Tahsis in the west, and of course, Campbell River in the centre.

More than 50 people came to the conference, held at the Maritime Heritage Centre in Campbell River. The invitation list tried to reflect the diverse nature of our communities.

These were a cross section from the community: people involved in agriculture and aquaculture; small business, large corporations and co-operatives; elected representatives and First Nations; seniors and youth; artists and environmentalists; labour and educators; healthcare and childcare.

To generate discussion and debate each table of participants was provided with questions to discuss, with the full understanding that there is no simple answer. These questions were looking, broadly, at our assets, our values and our priorities. Because of time constraints, there was only one report to the rest of the conference participants, after all three sets of questions had been discussed.

Some people were initially concerned that this was going to be another talking shop, in which our communities' problems and opportunities would be discussed at a time when action is needed. However it soon felt that people became engaged in the discussions and some participants clearly felt we needed more venues to have in depth discussions involving such a cross section of people.

Themes

Words echoed around the room, voices did not rise to be heard but conversations and dialogues evolved. Sustainability – which means as one person said “forever” -- diversity and flexibility were heard time and again from people at the seven tables. Our assets are our people, our environment, our location. Working with First Nations is a key; ensuring decent paying work for people is another. Accountability and transparency in government and a long term vision from anyone in office were repeated by many participants.

The Questions

1. Sound Economies

Communities become successful in part because they discover, develop and connect their assets. They develop environments which encourage people to contribute their talents, skills and experiences to build economies and generate well being.

- a. What are the most important assets -- cultural, physical, economic or organizational – on which our communities can build a sustainable future for all?*
- b. How are people vesting in sustainable economic initiatives in our communities?*

The first set of questions gave people a chance to examine our communities' assets and how they are being used. They were described in various ways by various tables.

Our natural environment was a common theme – its values for its beauty as well as the economic value in an economy which uses resources. But the environment was also looked at from a clear economic resources standpoint: the opportunities for expanding alternate energies, particularly wind, solar and tidal, was mentioned by a number of people. Our clean water was also noted as an important attribute.

The people who live in our communities were also seen as an important asset: people who are committed to the community, who have a pride in the area. This also started a discussion about education and the importance of an educated population to a healthy society and a vibrant economy. The importance and strengths of our First Nations communities was also recognised by many participants.

Our cultural assets and cultural diversity were highlighted: the museum, the art gallery, the many festivals held. The cultural diversity of our communities was noted as was the increasing involvement of First Nations culture in our everyday lives. Cultural assets and cultural industries are evolving, as is seen in the creative industries sector which is gaining an increasing foothold in the city.

Campbell River and the Strathcona area have some very valuable physical assets: the deep water ports, the inland island highway, the mill site and the airport, which is being expanded. This, combined with plans for the new regional hospital, affordable housing, and the existing city infrastructure gave people hope for economic vitality. The wealth of Crown land, and growing agriculture and aquaculture sectors are additional strengths. And these physical assets, along with the environment, has helped tourism grow as a strong, albeit seasonal, economic initiative.

2. Smart Government

Prosperity for everyone requires smart government with an ability to encourage economic activity consistent with strong values and clear goals.

- a. What values and assumptions currently inform our economic policy?*
- b. What values should inform our economic policy?*

The second set of questions encouraged people to examine our values as individuals, communities and society. Without such an understanding, and common agreement on principles, the foundations for building a healthy economy are weak.

What was interesting for many was the broad spectrum of values, of what is important to people within our community. One of the central themes was the importance of a sense of community and what contributes to that.

A snapshot of that discussion would read as:

- “It’s a home town feeling”;
- “It’s about families and putting down roots”;
- “It’s that people buy into the community; they are interested and they invest”;
- “It’s about participation: we need to make sure young people can participate, that there are jobs and education for them”;
- “It’s about a decent life for everyone”;
- “It’s a recognition of First Nations rights and history in our community”;
- “Corporations look after the bottom line but communities look after each other.”

Underlying these thoughts about our communities as the root for any economic development was the recognition from many participants that a healthy environment is also a vital prerequisite. Likewise our public health care system was recognised as important as a value that unites us and one that is important for business.

Ideas such as diversification, sustainability and flexibility were discussed through an economic lens. In our resource based communities these terms were translated in various ways, but the need for value added and for industry to do business without doing environmental harm were discussed; some talked about the need to limit our use of natural resources and to question the concept of growth when talking of sustainability. The emotional as well as economic value of our public lands was also raised.

The value of our natural resources was also recognised as a continued key for economic development: that as far as possible these should be kept and used in the province. There was a concern by some that our assets are being sold and exported. The need to encourage BC based businesses and Canadian companies was raised in contrast to the current route of attracting international and immigrant investors. Some said it was important for the community to have big business for job creation; others said a long term strategy was needed to ensure long term stability. The focus on retirees to evolve the community was questioned by some.

In looking at the economy, questions of corporate responsibility were raised. Some questioned the line between profit and greed. And many were concerned about the growing income gap.

Raising questions about values also allowed people to discuss government and governance. A repeated theme was the need for a long term perspective, rather than policy being rooted in the three (municipal) or four (provincial) year election cycles. People called for greater transparency in government and less partisan politics: the party system was cited as a problem for healthy debate and planning. The question of immigration policy, so people are able to stay in Canada if they want to, was also raised by some.

3. Defining and Developing Priorities

With the previous discussions in mind, think about the future, about your vision for the next decade.

- a. What are the top three priorities for establishing a sustainable economy?*
- b. How can we achieve these goals?*
- c. What is the role of individuals and the community, of government and non governmental organisations, of the private sector and other public bodies?*

Pulling together the thoughts and ideas generated by the first two sets of questions, participants were asked to focus on their priorities for development.

The concept of sustainability was a priority for many people; and while we often talk about our communities being resilient, that specific concept was not expressed. Discussion was underlined with

the need for long term planning, for environmental, social and economic responsibility, for energy conservation and for natural resources to be safeguarded.

As one group said, “the goal is to stay as close to sustainable as is possible, encouraging local agriculture and other industries that can be local and based on renewable assets.”

One group of participants raised the idea of an audit of communities across the island and province to see what resources they have and what could be done with them. Others suggested that a concerted effort to encourage small business should be instigated. This would include providing incentives, removing barriers and examining the idea of economic clusters. At the heart of this would be fostering local entrepreneurial initiatives. Some talked about the need for assistance in generating small, local start ups. Opportunities for young people along with decent wages were raised as part of a healthy economy.

Some suggested that the community needs to establish an identity and market its assets; in a similar vein others spoke of defining those assets, taking ownership of them, and marketing them. Businesses’ role within the community was also discussed with some suggesting that there be more involvement with the larger community, whether that be supporting not for profit organisations or having a more socially active agenda.

This was counterpointed with the need for bloc funding for social service organisations who are scrabbling for funding. Some participants talked about how volunteers are burning out or leaving organisations because they can no longer afford not to have paid employment. Others talked of the need for supports for people with mental illness in the community.

The role of government came in to play during the discussion on priorities. The feeling from many tables was that governments need to listen to communities more closely; provincial government in particular has a responsibility for helping with infrastructure in small rural communities. It also has an important role in transportation and communications networks and healthcare, which all underpin economic development. Community engagement in government was also cited as a priority. Civic literacy needs promotion so that people take responsibility and vote, and start to change the future.

Part of many of the discussions was the role of First Nations. There was a strong desire for treaty and land claims issues to be settled, both in the interest of justice for First Nations and for economic stability for everyone. One suggestion was to draft protocol agreements between First Nations, the regional district and the city; others talked about the need to get beyond divisions.

Summations

At the end of the afternoon each group had approximately (and loosely defined) two minutes to sum up. That was of course an impossible task for anyone when so many good ideas had been generated. But recurrent themes came through each of the table’s summaries.

Education, health, sustainable wages, infrastructure and a healthy environment are central for healthy communities, but with an awareness that we cannot take any of these for granted. We need to protect, enhance and develop all of these.

All the groups talked about the need for being strategic in economic and business development. A number of people talked about encouraging self sufficiency – for individuals, business and communities.

Also central to many of the presentations was the importance of inclusiveness within the community, by reaching out to groups who may not normally have a place at the table. Likewise governments need to be more accountable and transparent. There is also a place for government to take seriously rural values: both the provincial and federal governments are regarded as urban focussed.

One of the comments was: “Very few political groups are willing to plan long range. We want to see a 30 year vision, built on environmental sustainability, people sustainability, education and healthy babies.”

While this might not be exactly what everyone wants, the notion of sustainability and long term planning was repeated time and again. As another participant said: “True sustainability is being able to do something forever, reimagining how people live in this place, forever.”

And Now?

People who may not often get the opportunity to talk with one another spent three hours discussing their ideas for making our communities - and our province - healthier, more sustainable, and more resilient. That in itself is important. But it is equally important those voices are heard and continue to be heard.

The thoughts and ideas which were generated in this session will be part of thinking and planning provincially and on a community by community level. As part of the Official Opposition’s Our Province Our Future series, this paper will be shared as policy development work proceeds.

And as the MLA for the North Island, the issues raised in that half day conference will help me continue to advocate for the needs of all sectors of all our communities.

I again thank everyone who participated.

Claire Trevena, MLA
North Island

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