



Shaping Our Future

THE REGIONAL DISTRICT OF NANAIMO
GROWTH STRATEGY REVIEW

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Regional Growth Strategy Review 2007-2008

A Discussion Paper on Sustainability Principles for the Regional Growth Strategy

Table of Contents

Preamble 1

What are Sustainability Principles? 3

What is Sustainability? 4

How do we get to Sustainability Principles? 6

How will Sustainability Principles fit into the RGS? 8

Conclusion 8

Next Steps 9

Preamble

The RDN initiated a comprehensive review of the Regional Growth Strategy (RGS) in 2007¹. As part of the review, discussion papers were to be prepared at two different points in the review process. The first discussion paper, released in Spring 2008, was intended to get community feedback on those sustainability challenges that could be addressed in a revised regional growth strategy. In conjunction with the release of the discussion paper, two public workshops were held and an online survey was made available. Feedback from the community was received on the important issues to be addressed in the review and on sustainability challenges to be included in a revised RGS.

During the first round of consultation for the RGS Review, many comments were provided on a wide range of sustainability issues. In terms of improvements to the RGS, these comments generally fell into four broad areas: implementation, sustainability principles, improving existing policies, and expanding the content of the RGS to address a broader range of sustainability challenges.

Implementation

Many participants commented that the RGS is only effective if it is implemented. Many people felt that there has not been enough done to implement the policies in the RGS and also that not enough has been done to explain that the RGS is only a policy document and that it must be implemented by using other tools such as zoning. The RGS should be more explicit about how it will be implemented.

Sustainability principles

With the Board direction that the RGS should be the cornerstone of the movement to a more sustainable region, many participants commented that the RGS should be based on sustainability principles. Currently, the RGS does not have a basis in sustainability principles and is generally focused on land use and development.

Broadening Sustainability

There is a need to expand the range of sustainability challenges that are in the regional growth strategy. For it to be the key document that guides the actions to becoming a more sustainable

¹ Please see www.shapingourfuture.ca for additional information on the RGS Review.

region it needs to cover a broader range of sustainability challenges. In particular, those related to social and economic sustainability.

Updating Existing Policies

Several participants commented that some of the existing RGS policies need to be improved and updated. With the RGS having a broader scope based on sustainability, there is a need to refine and possibly add to some of the policies that are already in the RGS so that they reflect the new priorities related to sustainability.

Therefore, based on the feedback received to date, a second set of four discussion papers is being prepared to address the main themes that came out of the first round of public consultation. As well, two discussion papers will deal with new provincial legislation related to regional growth strategies. The topics for the six discussion papers are:

- Implementation;
- Sustainability Principles;
- Strengthening Existing RGS Policies;
- Expanded Sustainability Policies;
- Greenhouse Gas Targets; and,
- Amending the RGS.

Each discussion paper will include: an introduction to the topic, a summary of public input; direction provided by the RDN Board; background on the topic; and, possible options for including goals/statements/policy in a revised RGS.

As stated in the first discussion paper released in Spring 2008, the challenge is to strike a balance between keeping decisions at the local level as much as possible and the need for consistent actions to achieve a liveable and sustainable region. After this phase of consultation is completed and the results of the input are compiled, a draft of a revised RGS will be developed.

What are Sustainability Principles?

Put most simply, a principle is a fundamental truth or proposition that is irrefutable and holds true in all situations for those who abide by it. The word itself comes from the Latin for 'beginning', or 'first part'², implying that a principle is a starting point for one's beliefs; an idea that has evolved over time to describe the self-evident truths that form the basis for one's actions.

Based on this understanding, it is one's principles that establish the constraints within which one makes choices. If well formulated and agreed to by consensus, principles provide solid guidance for, and reasonable expectations on decision-makers.

Generally, principles have been developed to guide how people treat one another. The aim was to ensure that harm to one another was avoided, and human well-being was protected. Principles were very human-focussed, and included language such as:

- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity;
- Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person; and
- Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression...³

At the same time, the natural world was perceived as limitless and infinitely resilient against human activities. People posed no real threat to the natural world, so constraints on behaviour were unnecessary. Conversely, threats posed to people by the natural world, e.g. by natural disaster, were beyond human control, completely outside the realm of human choice and action.

In recent generations, however, we have realized that the world is not limitless, and it is very vulnerable to human activity. Current patterns of resource extraction, human consumption and waste generation have exceeded the productive and assimilative capacities of ecosystems around the world, threatening the structure and function of the global biosphere⁴. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that long-term human health and well-being, cultural identity and economic stability are heavily dependent on naturally occurring ecosystem services⁵. We now

² From The Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com>), accessed December 11, 2008.

³ Three of the thirty Articles contained with the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>), accessed December 29, 2008.

⁴ According to the United Nations *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, 15 of the 24 global ecosystem services examined are being degraded or used unsustainably.

⁵ Ecosystem services are the naturally occurring processes in functioning ecosystems that also benefit people, including *provisioning services* (e.g. food, water, timber); *regulating services* (e.g. climate stability, flood control,

know that threats posed by people to the natural world are real; the consequences of environmental collapse for people are dire; and most importantly, the causes are intimately linked to human choice and action.

This shows that traditional human-centred principles alone are unable to ensure human well-being because they do not specifically guide decisions toward sustaining a healthy biosphere. Therefore, a broader set of sustainability principles, predicated on the inseparability of environmental, social and economic systems is necessary in order to guide our actions toward ongoing social and economic well-being, both of which rely on the ongoing well-being of the planet. Fortunately, the RDN Board has provided the direction that sustainability is to guide all aspects of regional governance, planning and development, which requires establishing, supporting, and following a clear, understandable and well founded set of sustainability principles.

What is Sustainability?

Given that the purpose of this paper is to elicit discussion about the sustainability principles that will form a basis for the RGS, it is necessary to briefly review the meaning of sustainability. Agreement on a common definition of sustainability is needed to establish a set of sustainability principles.

The previous discussion laid the foundation for the understanding that environmental, social and economic systems are deeply interconnected, a notion implicit in any modern understanding of sustainability, including the understanding of sustainability held by the RDN:

Sustainability is about recognizing the inter-relationships between our environment, our society and our economy. It is about recognizing that people are part of the ecosystem, and that the economic and social lives of people should be integrated into the environment, in ways that maintain or enhance the environment, rather than degrade or destroy it. Put another way, sustainability recognizes that our economy exists within society, that society exists within the environment, and that the environment surrounds and supports society. (State of Sustainability Report, 2002)

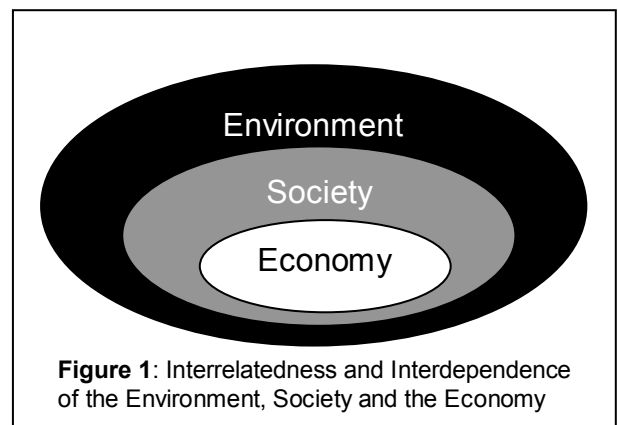


Figure 1: Interrelatedness and Interdependence of the Environment, Society and the Economy

waste assimilation, water purification); *cultural services* (e.g. recreation, spiritual fulfillment); and *supporting services* (e.g. soil formation, photosynthesis, nutrient cycling). (*Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, p. v).

SHAPING OUR FUTURE

A Discussion Paper on Sustainability Principles for the Regional Growth Strategy

The ideas expressed in this passage indicate an important shift away from a belief in the need to balance economic, social and environmental values to the realization that human beings and social and economic systems exist within, and are subordinate to the environment, as illustrated in Figure 1. While the enormity of the implications of this recognition cannot be overstated, it is also important to acknowledge that a definition of ‘sustainability’ has not actually been provided. What is most interesting in the context of this paper is that the description above serves as an expression of first principles - the fundamental truths about what we as people need to recognize about ourselves, as well as the relationships between our social and economic systems and the natural environment if sustainability is to be achieved. Namely:

- that human beings are part of the ecosystem;
- that the economic and social lives of people must be integrated into the natural environment in ways that maintain and enhance the environment; and
- that our economy exists within society, that society exists within the environment, and that the environment surrounds and supports society

What, then, is sustainability? This question was posed to residents of the RDN over the Regional Growth Strategy review period in 2008, and resulted in a wide range of insightful comments, with some examples included in the ‘community quotes’ highlighted at right.

At its most basic level, and something intuitively understood by most people is that sustainability refers to the property of persisting in a given state, indefinitely.

““ COMMUNITY QUOTES

“The top priority must be establishing a clear definition of sustainability, one that is written in plain language and that will form the basis for the Regional Growth Strategy.”

“Sustainability is defined as an activity being able to continue at a given level indefinitely.”

“...living within the limits of ecological sustainability, which is the maintenance of ecological processes so that the biological productivity of the Earth endures...”

“...managing our land and natural resources in away that meets human needs without depleting or damaging the environment and the associated natural resources.”

“a population that can be supported by the resources of the region, and an economy whose throughput is within the regenerative and assimilative capacity of the ecosphere.”

“...long term social and economic well being requires our choosing to live in a just and equitable way that ensures the viability and subsistence of all living species and their places.””

This raises two questions:

- What must persist? and
- What constitutes persistence?

At this stage it should be clear that it is the interrelated and interdependent environmental, social and economic systems that must persist. The second question, which can be rephrased as “What is necessary for each of these systems to remain intact indefinitely?”, is much trickier. For the sake of simplicity, and in keeping with the wider debate on the subject, the persistence of a system is the result of its ongoing functioning, which in turn depends on maintaining system structure, processes and productivity⁶.

To serve as a starting point for a broader discussion about sustainability principles then, the following definition of sustainability is proposed: *Sustainability is the ability of ecological, social and economic systems to maintain ongoing function over time by retaining their structure, processes and productivity.*

Keeping the definition simple allows further elaboration to take place through the development of more specific principles.

How do we get to Sustainability Principles?

Getting to sustainability principles entails two major spheres of work: research into existing principles from elsewhere; and collaborating with residents to develop locally relevant principles.

Over the course of 2008, RDN staff have been in consultation with local residents not only to discuss the evolution of the Regional Growth Strategy, but also to seek input on revisions to the Official Community Plan for Electoral Area ‘A’ as well as planning for Village Centres in Electoral Area ‘H’. Through each of these processes, the desire to place greater emphasis on sustainability, including developing sustainability principles has been loud and clear. Given the nature of these processes, the OCP review and Village Centre planning process have progressed further than the RGS review, and as a result a significant amount of research into existing sustainability principles has already been done.

⁶ For a good synthesis of this view, see Woodwell, George M. (2002) “*On Purpose in Science, Conservation and Government: The Functional Integrity of the Earth is at Issue not Biodiversity*” in *Ambio* vol. 31, no.5, August 2002, p. 432-436. Available at <http://ambio.allenpress.com/perlserv/?request=index-html>, accessed January 5, 2009.

The following list provides a sampling of the many sets of sustainability principles examined, as well as links to relevant websites:

- City of Rossland Sustainability Principles http://cfdcmail.com/cms/Visions_to_Action.338.0.html
(Page 8 of the *Strategic Sustainability Plan*)
- The Natural Step Framework <http://www.naturalstep.ca/>
- Lisbon Principles of Sustainable Governance http://www.eoearth.org/article/Lisbon_principles_of_sustainable_governance
- Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency Sustainability Principles http://www.ceaa.gc.ca/015/001/009/2_e.htm#Anchor-Principle-52770
- UNEP Principles for a Sustainable City http://www.penrithcity.nsw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/Website/Your_Council/Publications/Management_Plan/2008_-_2009/TableA.pdf
- Smart Growth Principles <http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=133>
- 'Creating a Sustainable City' City of Vancouver Sustainability Principles <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/ctyclerk/ccclerk/020423/rr3.htm>

Not surprisingly, there are a great many similarities among these and the many other sets of sustainability principles examined. While the wording of principles may be unique and priorities vary, there are generally six recurring themes that at least one, and often several, sustainability principles touch on. These are:

- Complexity
- Participation
- Equity
- Efficiency
- Ecological Integrity
- Sense of Place

Principles emphasizing **complexity** stress the idea that there is a great deal unknown about the world, that everything is interrelated, and that the relationships between causes and effects are intricate and unpredictable. Principles about **participation** stress the importance of participatory democracy whereby those affected by decisions should have a say in decision-making, and that governments should be influenced by consensus-based, collaborative processes that actively involve citizens. Principles about **equity** build on long-held ideas about human rights, such as 'all people are equal' to include notions such as intergenerational equity, i.e. the needs of future generations are as important as the needs of present generations.

Efficiency related principles focus on statements about continual improvement and innovation, and fiscal and economic prudence as well as ideas such as eliminating waste and getting more from less. Often sustainability principles include statements about better transportation systems and enhanced mobility options, which are also included in the efficiency theme. **Ecological integrity** is the most ubiquitous theme in sustainability principles, touching on ideas such as the inherent value of biodiversity, the importance of ecosystem function for human well-being, and respecting the limits imposed by an area's carrying capacity, or the productive and assimilative thresholds of a given place. Finally, sustainability principles often include statements that orient around the importance of a **sense of place**, emphasizing community identity, social cohesion, landscape character and cultural history, as examples. The premise for principles in this theme is that it is important to preserve the distinctive characteristics that make a place a unique, meaningful home for its residents.

Using these six themes as a guide, the RDN will continue to seek community input through the Regional Growth Strategy Review process in 2009, with the goal of developing sustainability principles that reflect regional issues and priorities, but that are also consistent with widely held ideas about sustainability. These principles will be incorporated into the Regional Growth Strategy, thereby guiding decisions about managing growth and development in the Regional District of Nanaimo.

How will Sustainability Principles fit into the RGS?

At this point, midway through the Regional Growth Strategy Review, it is difficult to express with precision how the structure of the new RGS is going to look. Thus, it is difficult to say exactly how or where sustainability principles will fit into that structure. That being the case, there is general consensus that sustainability principles will provide the foundation for the revised RGS, so it is envisioned that they will hold a very prominent position at the beginning of the document. It is also envisioned that the sustainability principles will serve as a thread flowing through the document, tying the principles to the goals, objectives, policies and/ or other content that will form the main substance of the RGS.

Conclusion

Principles have long been used to guide decisions toward a desired end, usually oriented around protecting human well-being. In recent generations, we have become very aware that human well-being can only be sustained over the long-term by well-functioning, interrelated environmental, social and economic systems. This is an awareness that is shared widely in the

RDN. Elected officials have provided direction that all aspects of regional planning and governance be based on sustainability, and local residents have demanded that our policies lead the way in fostering a transition toward a more sustainable region.

In response, the RDN will use sustainability principles as the foundation for a revised and updated Regional Growth Strategy. This will ensure that future decision-making is grounded in a shared understanding of what sustainability means, and how a sustainable society can be achieved.

To arrive at these principles, RDN staff will balance input from local residents with well-established ideas about sustainability from around the world. The result will be a Regional Growth Strategy that reflects regional needs, responds to foreseeable trends, and aims to manage future development, growth and change in a way that maintains and enhances local environmental, social and economic systems.

Next Steps

This discussion paper is intended to initiate discussion on how the regional growth strategy can be improved so that it better addresses a wider range of sustainability challenges. The options presented here are not a final product. They are intended to initiate a dialogue on the content for a new and revised regional growth strategy based on sustainability principles.

After this phase of consultation is completed and the results of the input are compiled, a first draft of a new regional growth strategy will be developed. Community input on the draft will be sought.