



Written Submissions

Consultation on some possible changes to the Regional Growth Strategy

Introduction

Through March and April 2009 the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) engaged the public on a series of possible changes to the Regional Growth Strategy (RGS). The community workbook was one of the methods of public consultation used to gauge public support for these changes. In conjunction with a short online survey, the workbook provided a means to gather feedback on eleven of the most significant possible changes identified in this phase of the review. Respondents were also encouraged to submit their thoughts and ideas by email or in writing.

Purpose

Consultation on the possible changes to the RGS was intended to solicit feedback from the public on the shape of a revised RGS. The suggested possible changes were based in the ideas provided by participants in the RGS workshops and online survey held in 2008. The participants at the preceding phase of the review suggested that significant changes to the existing RGS were necessary for the RDN to become a sustainable region. This phase of the review suggested to revisit these ideas as possible changes in order to solicit further comment prior to the preparation of a formal draft RGS.

Method

This phase of the review was based on approaching community groups where they regularly meet, instead of relying on them to attend formal RDN meetings. The eleven most significant possible changes from the discussion papers were identified and summarized in a series of 'backgrounders' included with the community workbook. The eleven background reports are:

- Sustainability principles
- Amending the RGS
- Implementation and monitoring
- Greenhouse gas emissions and energy use
- Affordable housing
- Farming and food production
- Land use and transportation
- Servicing
- The economy, land use and transportation
- Complete, compact communities
- RGS education and awareness

By attending the community group meetings, RDN staff connected with multiple groups representing specific communities, farmers, builders, naturalists, university and high school students. RDN staff provided a 20 minute presentation on the eleven significant possible changes and invited group discussion. A public presentation and discussion was also held in the RDN Board room for individuals not part of a community organisation.

To promote the workbook and survey more broadly within the region, displays were set up at various events throughout the region. The organisations consulted and individuals

attending either meetings or events were encouraged to complete the workbook and survey.

Summary

Community Workbooks

Community groups and individuals were encouraged to complete both the workbook and the online survey. The community workbook provided more opportunity for reflective comments on the most significant issues affecting the region than did the brief online survey. There were 3 community groups and 13 individuals who completed the workbook both the workbook and the online survey. The comments received indicate strong support for the possible changes suggested for the draft RGS, as well as specific suggestions for these revised policies.

Sustainability Principles – The responses in the workbook emphasize the fundamental role that the sustainability principles should have in the document. The responses indicated that current lifestyles and development patterns are exceeding the carrying capacity of the region. The recommendations were that the RGS sustainability principles should be sincere, reflecting the intention to implement sustainability policies and maintain transparency in decisions affecting the region. The principles should reflect efficiency in how homes and communities are constructed. Equity was emphasised to enhance the social lives of people. Also, the empowerment of individuals and households to adopt more sustainable choices by changing the way people think about sustainability issues.

Amending the RGS – Respondents support the possible change for a clear and transparent amendment process for the RGS. Particular emphasis was placed on simplicity to promote understanding and public involvement in the amendment process. Many of the responses suggested that all amendments should be subject to a public process and require the support of the majority of the Board.

Implementation – The comments received expressed concern that the policies of the RGS will not be followed. Respondents support the direction of RGS policies, but suggested that the policies have not been adequately implemented in the actions or bylaws of local governments. Recommendations were for more public engagement in any monitoring program of the RGS policies. Education was also identified as an important part of implementation initiatives to engage the public on topics of sustainable lifestyle and community changes.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions – Most of the responses acknowledged the role that development patterns and transportation have in contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. The recommendations were to preserve large lots within rural areas and mitigate the effects of growth on the environment. Rethinking the existing urban areas is also necessary to diversify the mobility options within and between communities.

Affordable Housing – Strong support was expressed by respondents for adequate and affordable housing, but some comments reflected the difficulty of addressing the topic in the RGS. These responses reflected the need for affordable housing policies to work in conjunction with the initiatives of senior levels of government. Other suggestions reflect the importance of creating liveable communities to improve mobility options and services

available to households. Suggestions were also for more guidance on local government regulations and incentives, particularly zoning and Development Cost Charges.

Farming and food production – The comments support more direction within the RGS on to enhance food security in the region. Many comments focussed on reducing the fragmentation of land within rural areas and supporting the Agricultural Land Reserve designation. Additional direction should be given in the RGS to support farmers to maintain their land in active agricultural production, such as identifying the barriers to farming, such as water, regulations or infrastructure. Other comments were for the RGS to include provisions for community gardens and farmers markets. Some comments also identified impediments to farming from senior levels of government. Local governments may have an advocacy role in promoting changes to senior government regulations, particularly meat processing.

Land use and transportation planning – Most of the responses recognised the necessity to increase population densities within existing urban centres in order to support transit infrastructure and services. These comments emphasize the importance of having transit and commercial services within walking distances of dwellings and incorporating active transportation infrastructure within established communities. Enhancing mobility options includes improving pedestrian pathways, integrating cycling paths into transportation networks and providing incentives for carpooling. In the electoral areas, providing mobility options requires cooperation and collaboration with the Ministry of Transportation.

Servicing – Many responses acknowledged the importance of servicing for directing growth into urban centres and restricting growth outside. Where and when servicing will occur should be more explicit through either the RGS and/ or local official community plans.

Economy, land use and transportation – The predominant theme from the responses is to reduce transportation costs within urban areas by integrating a mix of land uses. Dense mixed-use communities may support a variety of mobility options to access services and employment. There was also support for industrial development that has a small ecological footprint and that can readily access resources and transportation networks.

Complete, Compact Communities – The responses express fundamental themes from the existing RGS, such as limiting growth outside of urban areas, creating self-sufficient communities and expanding the range of services provided within neighbourhoods to include places of employment. Some respondents expressed concerns that slowing growth may increase housing costs. Comments were received to reflect the importance of planning for local neighbourhoods.

Education and Awareness – The respondents stated that only a small segment of the local population is aware of the RGS and its implications. Comments emphasized the importance of maintaining ongoing dialogue with politicians and the public to implement regional sustainability goals. Accessibility and clarity of the information is also important to reach groups not traditionally involved with government decision making. Improving the online presence and accessibility was suggested as a means to reach younger generations.

Notes from meetings

The RDN still held a public presentation on April 21, 2009 to provide an opportunity for the general public to become informed about the possible changes and to solicit feedback. Discussion during the meeting focussed on the domestic and agricultural application of pesticides, defining sustainability principles, supporting local farmers and the role education has in implementing the goals of the RGS.

At a meeting held with the Friends of French Creek Conservation Society the following concerns were documented – ensure the conservation of wildlife habitat and parks through the urban containment boundaries, the need to remove the village centre designations in locations that cannot be serviced and changing zoning so that it complies with the designations in the RGS.

RDN staff also provided a presentation on the possible changes to the RGS to the Plan Nanaimo Advisory Committee. The committee submitted their minutes from the March 24 and May 19 meetings as input into the RGS review. Highlights from the minutes identified concerns regarding the amount of sprawl in rural areas, appropriate development for village nodes, and stronger support for directing growth into the city.

Letters from the public

The public were encouraged to comment on other topics from the discussion papers or issues not yet addressed in the RGS review. The correspondence received supports the direction established in the possible changes, and specific recommendations for the revising the RGS were also submitted. Emphasis is placed on the protection of sensitive ecosystems and water sources from the threat of development; rethinking the RGS to broaden the focus beyond growth; defining and gauging the sustainability of the region; and the creation of a transparent amendment process for the RGS.

Next Steps

The comments collected through the community workbook submissions and various public meetings support the direction identified in the discussion papers for a revised RGS. Comments for the changes also provide more specific recommendations for the RGS policies, in particular to include sustainability principles, a transparent amendment process in the RGS and inclusion of policies that address food security. These ideas will build upon and reaffirm the work completed by participants in the 2008 workshops and online survey.

The comments from the workbook, in conjunction with the results of the online survey and correspondence received from the public, will inform the content of the draft RGS. A draft of the revised RGS will be released in the Winter 2010, for additional public comment and input on the proposed changes.