



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 Expanded Sustainability Policies in the Regional Growth Strategy

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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 being 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.

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

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 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.

New Sustainability Topics

Since the adoption of the RGS in 2003 there has been an increased interest in all aspects of sustainable communities. One of the questions posed in the first phase of the RGS review was which of the sustainability challenges could be addressed in a revised RGS. Both the RDN Board and the community have expressed an interest in expanding the RGS to cover a broader range of issues related to growth and development. A top priority for the RDN is to address the impacts of climate change through such means as better integration of land use and transportation planning. Other sustainability challenges identified in the initial phase of the RGS review include food security, affordable housing and energy use. The existing RGS is primarily focussed on land use and development and does not provide direction for addressing the broader range of sustainability concerns. Along with the desire to address a broader range of sustainability issues is the recognition that the RGS should play a key role in educating and raising awareness about the importance of sustainable communities

Community Input

The community feedback from the online survey and the workshops indicated a desire for the RGS to address a broader range of sustainability topics. Participants at the workshops supported the existing RGS policies, but also identified new content that should be included in a revised RGS. New topics discussed through the public consultation included affordable housing, groundwater protection, food security, better integration of land use and transportation, more direction on servicing, more direction on greenway networks and more focus on the carrying capacity of the region.

One of the prominent new themes from the public workshops and survey was for more support for farmers and securing local food sources. Participants identified a need for “land use support for local farmers and food production from all levels of government.” Another emerging theme was for more connection between land use and transportation policies by “focussing development around transportation centres” to improve the delivery of transportation infrastructure and services. Participants also emphasized the need to implement existing policies along with adopting new policies.

Board Direction

An integral part of the RDN Board's Strategic Plan is to promote sustainable communities, reflecting the RDN priority to mitigate climate change. The Strategic Plan is the guiding document for all RDN decisions and documents, including the RGS. The Strategic Plan directs the actions of the RDN to reduce corporate and community emissions, promote energy alternatives and develop liveable communities. The plan is the highest level of guidance given to the RGS review.

The RDN Board has also given direction for expanded content in the RGS by receiving the State of Sustainability recommendations prepared by the RGMAC. The Board motion was that the recommendations pertaining to the RGS be considered in the review process. The recommendation from the RGMAC report identified enforcement and strengthening of existing policies, as well as the inclusion of new policies to cover a wider range of sustainability issues. The proposed changes to the RGS in this report reflect the recommendations provided by RGMAC and the public consultation held in the spring.

Options for changes to the RGS

Food Security

Food security is important to the region's sustainability as locally grown or raised agricultural products support a local food supply and reduce the region's reliance on imported food products. The local production of food supports the RDN commitment to sustainability by reducing emissions from transportation and contributing towards local employment opportunities in food production. Maintaining this food source requires that agricultural land is preserved for farming uses and farming remains a commercially viable option for property owners. Participants from both sustainability workshops and the online survey agreed that there was a "lack of support for local farms to produce food for local consumption." The RGS contains policies to maintain existing farmland but public input suggests that the RGS should provide more direction on how to protect farmland, remove obstacles to urban agriculture and support local food production.

How may the RGS provide more direction for the support of farming?

The RGS could include strategies for local governments to promote farming and support farmers. These strategies could address urban interface issues, non-farm uses, urban agriculture, needs of farmers, agri-tourism and compatible uses, collaboration and partnerships, and fiscal measures. The aim is to remove barriers to farming and to promote local food production. The RGS could also support the use of lands outside of the ALR suitable for farming related uses such as food processing. The RGS could provide direction for the implementation of such strategies through official community plans and other appropriate tools.

How may the RGS protect agricultural land within the region?

The RGS could include strategies for protecting farmland in the ALR and other farmland not in the ALR with direction for policies to be included in official community plans. The RDN and member municipalities could work with the Agricultural Land Commission to develop and implement a harmonized Agricultural Land Reserve exclusion application review process, where the RDN and municipalities participate with the intent of ensuring consistency with the Regional Growth Strategy.

Affordable Housing

Initial input to the RGS Review indicates that people are concerned about the cost of housing and the type of housing that is currently available. In the RGS survey held in the spring of 2008 23.5% of residents indicated that they were unable to afford adequate affordable housing. Affordable housing includes both market and non-market housing that meet the needs of residents with diverse incomes and abilities. The provision of affordable housing has so far not been addressed through the RGS, but it has been recognised by the RDN as a sustainability issue that requires a regional approach through a document such as the RGS. One of the discussion topics at the workshops and a recurring theme in the survey was for the regional coordination of affordable housing strategies. As well, the community acknowledges that the provision of affordable housing requires partnerships including local government, the provincial government, the construction industry and not for profit agencies.

What role should the RDN have in affordable housing?

The RGS could establish that the provision of affordable housing is a top priority for the region and include a strategy and policies for the provision of affordable housing. The strategy would outline the roles and responsibilities of the RDN, member municipalities and others involved in the provision of affordable housing. An affordable housing strategy has already been identified in the RDN Board Strategic Plan and the RDN has initiated an affordable housing study that will support further actions on this important issue.

How may the RGS provide more direction for affordable housing?

The RGS could include a strategy directing local governments to include policies in their official community plans to identify how they will contribute towards providing affordable housing in the region. The RGS could set housing targets appropriate to municipalities and electoral areas including the appropriate form of affordable housing for urban and rural areas. Direction for the RDN and municipalities may include housing needs assessments, strategies for meeting the demand for affordable ownership and rental housing, and the most appropriate tools for securing additional affordable housing.

Changing Demographics

Similar to other communities on Vancouver Island, the population of the region is aging as the largest cohort, the post-World War II baby boom generation, reaches retirement. The changing composition of the population will require a shift in the current land use patterns and services provided by local governments to accommodate the growing number of seniors. Comments from the public consultation suggest that local government policy for housing, transportation and services should incorporate an emphasis on the aging population. Village centres will need to adapt the land use patterns to create mixed use communities where seniors and other age groups may access retail and services. One comment from the survey stated that local governments need to “work with provincial/federal [agencies] to ensure that where appropriate, facilities like schools and hospitals and medical clinics are located [within] 2 to 3 km of user populations rather than exclusively in a centralised regional facility 40 to 160 km away.”

How can the RGS promote communities that are inclusive of seniors?

The RGS could provide direction for official community plans to include policies that support communities that are inclusive of the elderly. The official community plan policies could promote inclusive communities with adaptable housing, access to appropriate services and transportation choices for seniors. The RGS policy could link with other village centre policies in the document to encourage mixed use communities with places to live, play and work for seniors and other age groups. The official community plans could also provide direction to coordinate local government land use planning with senior government services such as health care and leisure facilities.

Regional Transportation

The location of the RDN positions it to be a gateway for tourism and a transshipment hub for freight on central Vancouver Island. Comments received through the public consultation identify a need for a broader perspective on regional transportation in the RGS as the region becomes more prominent. Participants expressed concerns over the impact of the airport on adjacent communities and showed support for the expansion of rail in the region for shipping and possible commuter rail. The RDN does not have jurisdiction over intraregional transportation modes such as airports or ports, but the role of the RDN could be clarified in the RGS.

How can the RGS coordinate between land use and transportation planning?

The RGS could provide direction to reconcile land use policies with intraregional transportation. Statements could give direction for official community plans to include policies that harmonize regional transportation networks with adjacent land uses to reduce conflicts and support efficient intraregional transportation. Official community plans may also be directed to include advocacy policies where conflicts may emerge between the community and transportation organisations outside of local government jurisdiction.

How can the RGS support the efficient regional movement of people and goods?

The RGS could include direction to identify the role of intraregional transportation modes such as airports, ferry service, railways, seaports and provincial highways. The RGS could support development of a strategy to coordinate intraregional transportation with regional transit, integrate shipping routes with compatible land uses and promote collaboration with other organisations. The RDN Board Strategic Plan also provides support for improved

intraregional transportation options, specifically recommending the protection of the E&N corridor in the RGS, official community plans and zoning bylaws. The RGS could give direction for the adoption of these strategies in official community plans and servicing plans.

Aquifer Protection

Groundwater is essential to sustaining communities and economic activity through much of the RDN. These groundwater sources are also important for ecosystems as freshwater from aquifers is discharged into lakes, streams and estuaries. In certain areas of the RDN, the amount of water being extracted from aquifers may exceed the ability of the aquifer to replenish stored water. There are signs that household demand for water has depleted groundwater resources beyond the aquifers ability to recharge to the same capacity.

What direction can the RGS provide to ensure development does not impact groundwater sources?

The RGS could provide direction to not support any development proposal that would deplete or contaminate groundwater in the RDN. The RDN and member municipalities would consider the impacts on groundwater of any development application in a groundwater recharge area or an aquifer identified as vulnerable. The RGS may include criteria for the evaluation of such development proposals. As recommended in the RDN Drinking Water and Watershed Protection Plan, any changes to the urban containment boundary could also require consideration of the impacts on groundwater.

What guidance can the RGS provide for the protection of groundwater?

The RGS could direct new growth into existing urban areas to reduce the impact on the region's groundwater. Focussing growth in existing urban centres will reduce many sources of groundwater contamination and depletion. The RGS could also provide direction to official community plans to adopt policies that protect aquifers, wellheads or sensitive groundwater resources. These official community plan policies may identify appropriate regulations and development standards for recharge areas or on sensitive aquifers.

Riparian and Natural Areas

Natural areas and open spaces sustain habitat for wildlife and are valuable for outdoor recreation that fosters health and wellness in the community. The encroachment of communities into resource lands threaten to fragment wildlife corridors or compromise these ecosystems. The growth of communities within the RDN must be reconciled with ecological objectives to protect natural areas and corridors to ensure impacts are mitigated. Maintaining the connectivity of natural areas through greenspace and aquatic corridors reflects the interdependency between isolated natural spaces for wildlife migration and natural ecological functions.

How can the RGS ensure that habitat protection is integrated between government jurisdictions?

The RGS could provide direction for a regional protected areas network to be created to identify areas with ecological significance for protection. The network could identify integrated wildlife networks connecting known environmentally sensitive lands with existing protected areas and Crown land. The RDN and member municipalities could work towards protecting the areas identified on the map or acquiring them for protection as parks. This approach is similar to the Regional Growth Strategy for the Capital Regional District, which includes a conservation strategy for interconnected green and blue space.

What direction can the RGS provide to protect wildlife habitat and corridors?

The RGS could include direction for a strategy to coordinate the actions of local governments to protect environmentally sensitive areas and green space. The strategy may direct official community plans and parks plans to include policies that conserve interconnected wildlife habitat and riparian networks. Local governments could establish lands designated for protection, appropriate regulatory tools, development standards in sensitive areas and linkages of corridors between jurisdictions. A statement could clarify the relation of the local actions with provincial and federal government environmentally sensitive area mapping and regulations.

Carrying Capacity

Carrying capacity is based on the ecological constraints that may support a population given the amount of food, water and habitat. Another way of approaching carrying capacity is ecological footprint. The ecological footprint is determined by how much land is needed to support the way we live. If everyone in the world lived like we do in southwest BC it would take four planets to sustain us.

Participants at the workshops suggested that the RGS lacked an appropriate definition of sustainability to establish the carrying capacity of the region. Participants commented that the RDN should “measure the environmental capacity first” before permitting further growth and “work with nature rather than against in order to reap economic, environmental, social and spiritual rewards.”

How can the RGS promote living within ecological constraints?

All RGS goals and policies could be directed by principles to support a sustainable region. These principles will not directly define the carrying capacity of the region, but may establish regional sustainability priorities for the goals of the RGS. Detail on the sustainability principles will be provided in a separate discussion paper.

Education and Awareness

Education is an essential part of realising the goals of the RGS. Education promotes dialogue and cooperation between local governments, senior levels of government, First Nations, community organisations and the general public to ensure that the RGS may be understood and acceptable to all groups involved. The existing RGS does not provide any direction on promoting education and awareness of RGS goals. The general lack of knowledge about the RGS has likely impeded meaningful participation by some groups and contributed to many of the policies in the RGS not being fully implemented.

How can the RGS provide direction for self-promotion?

As part of a section on implementation, the RGS could include a strategy to improve public awareness of RGS goals and its relationship with other planning documents. The strategy would provide direction to the RDN and member municipalities to encourage the

participation of diverse groups in the implementation of the RGS. The RGS could establish a process to educate politicians, business leaders, interest groups and the wider community. The strategy could also provide guidance for advocacy to promote sustainability by residents.

Energy Use

The conservation of energy has become a regional issue as population growth increases demand in all sectors for electricity and fuels for transportation. The high consumption of energy and fossil fuels depletes natural resources and produces emissions contributing to climate change and poor air quality. Greater energy self sufficiency based on renewable sources will also decrease the region's dependence on imported sources of energy. The RGS does recognise that the creation of 'complete communities' can reduce the consumption of energy through improved transportation options. However, the RGS does not address the effect of new and existing buildings on energy demand. Managing growth and building practices in the RDN will reduce reliance on imported sources of energy.

How can the RGS contribute to energy conservation and reduced reliance on imported energy for the region?

The RGS could provide direction that strategies prepared by the RDN and member municipalities to address climate change include measures to address the issues of energy use and energy self-sufficiency. Statements could recognise the important role of growth management objectives to reduce energy consumption and acknowledge the benefit of improved building standards. The RGS could also provide direction that energy use be addressed in official community plans by including policies for actions such as incentives and changes to regulations.

Air Quality

Participants in the online survey identified air quality as a significant concern and recommended ways that the RDN may reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emissions and fine particulate matter emitted into the atmosphere. While air quality monitoring in the RDN is limited, the available data indicates that air quality in the region at times may contribute to negative impacts on human health. In this region, approximately 70% of greenhouse gas emissions are from the

transportation sectors, in particular private automobile use. New provincial legislation now requires the RGS to include greenhouse gas emission reduction targets by 2010, which would include how different sources of emissions will be reduced. A separate discussion paper will provide detail on how greenhouse gas emission targets and measures could be included in the RGS.

How can the RGS address the issue of air quality?

The RGS could recognize that there is significant work being done by the RDN and member municipalities in the areas of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing energy use and improving air quality. The RGS could recognize that these plans and strategies for GHG emissions reduction are an important component of the overall goal of the RGS to create more sustainable communities. The RGS could also clarify how other policies in the RGS to better integrate land use and transit planning will contribute to air quality improvements and greenhouse gas reductions. The primary strategies to achieve this target are containment of the urban area, and focusing jobs, services and higher density housing in the urban areas to promote walking, cycling and transit trips.

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.