



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
Strengthening Existing Regional Growth Strategy Policies

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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.

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.

Strengthening Existing Policies

The preceding background phase for the RGS review and the State of Sustainability project suggested that the goals and policies of the existing RGS have not been realised. The review

identified that much of the growth in region continues to be outside of designated urban centres, contrary to the goals of the RGS. The existing RGS policies do provide some broad level guidance for growth management and environmental protection, but it does need to be 'fine tuned'. These existing policies are intended to leave the details of achieving the RGS goals at a local scale. Including detailed policies in a revised RGS may provide more direction for how official community plans should realise the goals of the RGS without affecting local autonomy.

Community Input

Feedback received through the online survey and both public workshops indicate that there is community support to strengthen existing policies in the RGS. There appeared to be strong support for the direction provided by the existing goals for strong urban containment, nodal development, rural preservation, environmental protection, a vibrant economy, and cooperation with other jurisdictions. However, there was concern about an apparent lack of progress in achieving the goals that was thought to be a result of policies that were either not strong enough or not being implemented. The implications of the feedback received are that some RGS policies should be strengthened and/or they should provide more direction for the RDN and the member municipalities.

Board Direction

In 2007 the Regional Board initiated the five year review of the RGS. The Regional Board decision for a comprehensive review of the RGS was based on direction from the State of Sustainability project and the RDN Board Strategic Plan. The State of Sustainability project indicated that the existing policies of the RGS were not as effective as they could be in realising the RGS goals. The Strategic Plan provided specific guidance for reviewing RGS urban containment and servicing policies that may realise the creation of sustainable and liveable communities. Existing policies will need to be strengthened and implemented to realise more progress in achieving the goals of the RGS.

Options for changes to the RGS

Strengthen Policies Related to RGS Goal 6: Vibrant and Sustainable Economy

The existing RGS has eight goals including a goal for a vibrant and sustainable economy. The goal for the economy includes 5 policies in support of the goal. Two policies focus on cooperation amongst different agencies and three policies generally consist of statements on the types of economic activities that should be supported: tourism, mining, and farming. While the policies do provide some direction on how a select few economic activities on the designated resource lands should be supported, there is very little direction provided on how to support the many economic activities that are located in the urban areas.

The location of economic activities well connected to the region's transportation system will help ensure that the region remains an attractive and efficient place to do business. The challenge for the Regional Growth Strategy is to ensure the economic needs of the region are met, including ensuring an adequate supply of appropriately located space for industry and commerce in all parts of the region.

In support of economic and social sustainability objectives, the Regional Growth Strategy should support more employment opportunities closer to where people live, not only to reduce commuting times for workers, but also to support economic development in the designated growth areas throughout the region. At the same time, the Regional Growth Strategy should aim to provide a sufficient supply of land for industry and commerce with good regional transportation connections for workers and customers.

How can the RGS ensure that there is adequate land available for all sectors of the economy?

The RGS could set clear direction that retail, office and institutional uses are to be concentrated in urban nodes and village centres close to where the majority of the population lives and where they can be efficiently served by transit. The RGS could also set clear direction that major commercial and institutional developments are not to be located outside of urban nodes. As well, the RGS could direct that official community plans include policies that indicate how these region wide directions will be supported.

How can the RGS ensure that businesses are well served by transportation and utility infrastructure?

The RGS could set clear direction for identifying the land requirements for regional industrial needs and ensure that areas for industry and commerce can be served by transportation and utility infrastructure. To prevent the industrial land base from being further eroded, the RGS could also set direction for official community plans to include policies that will prevent non-industrial uses in industrial areas.

Coordinating land use and public transit

Land use patterns play a key role in influencing travel patterns. Currently, transportation is the greatest source of GHG emissions in the RDN, comprising an estimated 63% of annual carbon dioxide emissions. Public transit will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and congestion on roads by curtailing car dependency, but it does require appropriate land use patterns to support the service. Currently none of the urban areas within the RDN meet the minimum density required for hourly transit service, being 10 units per hectare. Many participants in the RGS review process recognised the benefit of “building denser communities with the target of having more services within walking distances of more people.”

Existing village centres were intended to become mixed use, transit oriented communities, but the required densities and appropriate mix of uses have not yet been realised. The RGS contains some high level policies for transit and transportation alternatives, but in terms of how to move to a land use pattern that will support transit it provides very little direction. Currently, there is no direction on how to coordinate transit planning with land use planning. For transit services and active transportation infrastructure to be delivered efficiently they must be linked with land use policies. Urban containment, nodal development and improved mobility goals will need to become more integrated.

How can the RGS promote sustainable transportation choices?

The RGS could provide policy and direction on reducing the number of automobile trips, increasing opportunities for non-automobile trips, increasing opportunities for non-automobile forms of transportation such as walking, cycling, public transit and rail, and reducing GHG emissions from the transportation sector. The RGS could provide direction for official community plans to show how land use will support walking, cycling and transit.

Official community plans could also provide detail on how local transit, walking and cycling routes will be integrated with the regional transportation network. To gauge the effectiveness of the policies, the RGS could include targets for travel mode share, vehicle kilometres driven, and density in the different urban centres. The direction given in the RGS would be consistent with the strategies identified in the Board Strategic Plan to promote the development of more pedestrian oriented streets in the region.

How can the RGS promote transit oriented development patterns?

The RGS could provide direction for official community plans to include policies that support transit oriented development. A key land use component of the official community plans could be support for densities to support a viable regional transit network. The official community plans could use maps and policies to show how: the regional transit system will be supported by local land use decisions; new development will support transit; and, cycling and walking networks will be integrated with transit service. The RGS could set targets for transit, cycling and walking mode share with direction for official community plans to indicate how policies will contribute to the achievement of those targets.

Link Development with Servicing

Village centres designated in the existing RGS are all intended to be serviced with community water and sewer. The provision of urban services is fundamental to having the village centres accommodate a portion of the growth for the region as higher densities cannot be realised without appropriate sewage disposal. Fully serviced village centres are intended to receive future population growth, thereby relieving pressure on rural areas. Currently, most village centres are serviced by community water systems, but most of them still are not connected to community sewer. So far only the French Creek urban area has been fully serviced with water and sewer, and the Fairwinds urban area and Cedar village centre have partial sewer service. While the RGS states that all urban areas should be serviced by community water and sewer, there is no strategy in place to determine how these remaining village centres could be serviced. The main impediment in the past has been the cost of providing sewer to an area where most lots have already been developed. A revised RGS should address the practicality of designating village centres as areas for urban growth if those areas are not able to support that growth because community sewer services can not be provided. Alternatively, the RGS

could provide more direction for developing strategies on how the village centres will be serviced.

From a servicing perspective, how can the RGS provide direction for confirming the best places to accommodate growth in the region?

The RGS could reconfirm support for strong urban containment and that the majority of new growth is to be accommodated in the areas designated as Urban. The RGS could provide direction for the RDN and municipalities to conduct a land inventory and residential capacity analysis for all areas designated Urban as part of future official community plan reviews. The results of these analyses would then be used to set targets for each of the different Urban areas. As part of each analysis, the requirements to meet the targets would be identified. Once the targets were determined, the RGS could be amended to incorporate the target. If it appears that a growth target can not be met because of a lack of servicing, then the RGS Urban designation for that area could be reconsidered. As part of the reconsideration, the RGS could recognize that there may be different levels of Urban areas. Some could continue to be growth centres in a limited capacity while others may simply be the location of limited local services.

How can the RGS provide for the establishment of the services in village centres that are needed to support higher densities?

The RGS could provide direction for the development of servicing plans to support communities that use resources efficiently and minimize waste. The servicing plans could consider an Integrated Resource Management (IRM) approach for the servicing of village centres within designated Urban areas. The IRM treatment process recovers energy, water and materials from solid and liquid waste to be used to service public and private facilities. The process also does not require the extensive infrastructure of traditional waste treatment and may be constructed when required in village centres that do not currently have servicing.

Increasing Density in Urban Areas

The foundation of the RGS is to designate urban areas and then direct the vast majority of future population growth into those urban areas. The importance of increased density for sustainable communities is recognized in the Board Strategic Plan as it includes several

statements that higher densities are needed inside the urban containment boundary. In the urban areas, higher density development is needed to support a wide variety of sustainability goals and objectives. The increased density of urban areas is necessary to support public transit, reduce costs for utilities and infrastructure, provide a range of housing, and allow for travel by foot and bicycle. Increased density within urban areas also reduces development pressure in rural areas, preserving resource land and wildlife habitat and reducing vehicle kilometres driven by automobile, the number one contributor to GHG emissions in the region.

Despite the RGS guidance, population growth rates continue to be higher in rural areas rather than urban areas. Obstacles to realising the objectives of the existing RGS have been lack of servicing, public opposition to higher density, and a generous supply of land outside of the urban areas that is generally cheaper and easier to develop. The revised RGS must address these issues if higher urban densities are to be realised. Participants in the RGS workshops recognised that “density may aid sustainability” and recommended that the “region must maintain policies specific to sustainable density.” Community input received to date indicates that the RGS should provide more direction on how to achieve higher densities in the urban areas.

How can the RGS promote increased densities in the urban areas?

The RGS could include growth targets for both member municipalities and village centres in electoral areas. The targets may include the share each village centre would receive of regional population and housing growth. The RGS could recognise that municipalities will receive the majority of this growth and would be designated as the priority area for future growth. Electoral area village centres may be designated as secondary areas for future growth. These municipal and village targets may either be consolidated as ‘regional’ and ‘electoral area’ or be specific to the node. Regional context statements in each official community plan could be required to state how the targets will be met.

How can the RGS provide more specific direction for setting densities in the different urban areas?

The RGS could include a definition of density appropriate to urban and rural areas. Currently the RGS only defines development in Urban Areas as a density greater than 1 unit per hectare. Revised guidelines in the RGS could suggest densities appropriate for municipal nodes and village centres in electoral areas. Participants in the sustainability workshops supported higher densities in village centres but to a limited scale. The RGS

may also recommend the maximum density appropriate for rural areas outside of the urban containment boundary. Successive official community plans could use the definitions as a guideline in establishing the scale appropriate for municipal and electoral area nodes.

How can the RGS provide more guidance for increasing village centre densities?

The RGS could clarify how density may be increased within the urban containment boundary with suggested criteria that local governments may include in their official community plans. RDN and member municipalities could use the criteria to develop policies for incentives and regulations that direct growth into urban areas. The regional context statement would identify how the official community plan policies will conform to the direction given by the RGS.

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.