

## **Official Community Plan and a Healthy Community Vision**

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**Of the many tools available to local governments for the expression of future goals and objectives, one of the most important is the Official Community Plan.**

**Over the years, governments at all levels have come to realize the value of both short term and long term planning for the future. This is not a new concept by any means, but the relationship between land use planning and healthy communities has been difficult to express in terms that are easy for the average resident to understand, especially in areas that are more difficult to describe in terms of results or outcomes.**

**I am about to tell you the story of my community's journey through the Healthy Communities initiative some years ago, to illustrate how NOT to approach this topic! If I were a cartoonist, I would have some graphic illustrations to show you but you will have to be content with my verbal illustrations.**

**I have to say at the outset that this is my perspective as a relatively long time Councillor, and then Mayor of my community. Past Mayors and other Councillors (or even Aldermen) would probably give you a different picture. I do wish to make my point, however, over the next few minutes. To begin, I'll quote one of my favourite poets, Robbie Burns. He had this to say about planning...."The best laid plans of mice and man gang aft agley".**

**The struggle to describe the vision for a healthy community and place it in the context of land use planning is ongoing. If the OCP has managed to articulate this vision, an even greater challenge is the ability to measure progress. The phrase "Benchmarks" has become one of our buzz words, just as "healthy communities" was used to describe a single government program with the best of intentions in moving community in a positive direction. Since most citizens misinterpreted what "healthy communities" meant in the first place, the program overall did not flourish despite the efforts of some very well-meaning people.**

**In spite of that, the program and the phrase have helped communities to evolve to something greater, after a number of false starts and steps. In our case, after the Council somewhat reluctantly agreed to match the Province's alluring come-on of "seed money" for the program we had to figure out what a healthy community meant to us.**

**To the Administrator of the day it meant that the province was planning to gradually download social planning to the community level. What did that mean? Could it be management of the social welfare system by municipalities and/or regional districts? Maybe local governments were being set up to take over**

**hospitals..without adequate resources, of course. We all know that administrators are a suspicious lot, and that's one of the reasons we have them. The planning staff also had concerns...they had to divert some of their resources to manage this new program, even if we were able to hire co-ordinators or program managers on contract. Although some of our larger B.C. communities had a social planning function in place, most of us did not.**

**Engineering and Public Works certainly did not see the relevance of the program in spite of the fact that they plan for, and maintain so much of our infrastructure.**

**In our community we started off by gathering representation from many of the non-profit groups involved in social services. We have a huge volunteer base which, until that time, rarely co-ordinated their activities. We thought this would be a worthwhile project, and it was. But it still left a big gaping hole in creating the vision for a healthy community. These groups provide us with services that really count towards a "healthy community soul". Environmental groups are devoted to the healthy treatment of the land, air and water around us. The business community devotes its time to the provision of goods and services which in turn creates economic health. Local government's role, however, is to provide the "healthy body" through safe streets, good drinking water, proper sewage treatment and quality recreation to name a few amenities.**

**As a consequence our first go-round with the program led us unwittingly down a garden path of confusion and we were unable to articulate anything, never mind overall goals for a healthy community. We learned a lot about ourselves in the process, but the phrase that comes to mind in describing the first steps is "Airy Fairy"..something Councils do not want to hear about.**

**In spite of the false start, Council did agree to try again. We started over with a new co-ordinator who was successful in undoing some of the damage and moving us into more productive areas, which truly focussed on the community's concerns about health for the long term. Not only that, we all began to use the same framework for the vision. We continued to involve people from the social planning perspective but we added other aspects of health indicators such as air and water quality...and this was long before Walkerton showed us the critical importance of our number one resource.**

**So we centred ourselves around the 3-legged stool which describes the elements that create health. . .economic which is quite closely linked to social, and environmental. Some people feel the stool is better balanced when we add a fourth leg...that of cultural health. Although it may be considered as part of social, the growing multicultural and First Nations dynamics in B.C. add a special emphasis to our need for a multicultural perspective and approach to describe healthy communities.**

**Now how does all this relate to the Official Community Plan? According to Chapter 323 of the Local Government Act we have the authority to adopt, by by-law, one or**

more official community plans. Since I doubt that any community would be able to spend time working on more than one OCP, I assume that the “or more” refers to Regional Districts who DO adopt separate plans for electoral areas.

We are required by the Act to include certain statements, maps etc. for the area to be covered by the Plan. There is a lot to cover if you haven’t read the Act lately:

- Location, amount, type and density of residential development required over the next 5 years at least;
- Location, amount and type of commercial industrial, institutional, agricultural, recreational and public utility land;
- Location and area of sand and gravel deposits...(by the way, these are the main sources of revenue for many local governments in African countries);
- Restrictions on land use that is subject to hazardous conditions or environmentally sensitive;
- Location and phasing of major road, sewer and water systems (I think water should be first on that list);
- Location and type of public facilities including schools, parks, waste treatment and disposal sites;
- Anything else the Minister requires.

The other important area that gets its own category in the plan is the inclusion of housing policies respecting affordable, rental and special needs housing.

There is quite a difference between descriptions of what we have and plan to have on the land and the policies we set to encourage health in its broadest sense as we build for the future.

Our Planner’s approach to the update for our OCP will focus on the usage of our land base as a way to describe the vision for a healthy community.

That’s pretty straightforward, but section 878 gives us lots of scope to add the policies and statements that are much harder to describe as part of healthy communities:

- Local government policies for social needs, social well-being, and social development;
- Local government policies for the preservation, protection, restoration and enhancement of the natural environment, its ecosystems and biological diversity.

Although there are a couple of other areas in this section, these are two that communities MAY include, rather than MUST include. Historically the

responsibility for these areas are the domains of the Province and in some cases, the Feds. Through programs like Healthy Communities and other initiatives, the provincial and federal governments have both encouraged communities to become more involved in these issues at the local level.

I may begin to sound like an Administrator with that last statement which smacks of downloading, or offloading. With the advent of the Community Charter we will express our concerns in this regard through our UBCM paper.

While we work through these complexities in our relationships, there is at least one way to give clarity to this aspect of healthy communities in the OCP. Local governments seeking to promote a holistic approach to a healthy community through policy in the OCP can state the goals and objectives, and describe the needed approaches to other levels of government that can make them happen. If new programs and the new Charter continue to emphasize “partnerships”, and the community accepts this as desirable, that should be clear as well.

As for measuring progress, whether it's including Benchmark statements or progress reports, we asked a Task Force of knowledgeable people to look at this. What did they do? They told us in no uncertain terms that the OCP should be written simply and clearly enough for the average resident to be able to read the report card for himself or herself.

I still have many goals for my community. One is to have an OCP that articulates our vision for a healthy community. Another is that the OCP will be used by individuals and even school classes instead of just developers, or people who wave around their copies at public hearings to prove their side of an issue...although that's all right, too. I have decided that it is up to me and my fellow Council members to take the OCP and share it with the citizens of Campbell River, not just to leave it in the Planning library.

When I retired from the Federal government, I became a consultant (of course). My motto has been “Together we move Mountains”. If shaking ourselves up through change is what it takes to move mountains, we are in good shape right now. But the highest mountain I have to climb is probably to be able to describe the vision in our OCP clearly, in less than 30 minutes!!

Thanks for your interest, and good luck with your “Healthy Community OCP”.

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