

## **Report from UBCM**

The Union of BC Municipalities conference in Vancouver from September 16 to 20, 2013 presented an opportunity to put our local watershed issues before the 1600 local government officials from throughout the province. The paper published on this site was widely distributed to delegates thanks to a generous print run made available by John Hayes. In conversations with colleagues from many areas of the province, to a person they were incredulous about the issuing of the SIA permit. To them it was so counter to common sense and seriously delinquent for a Ministry of Environment to be the author of such a tangible insult to a community.

While there were a number of formal resolutions made by communities with watershed concerns (recorded earlier on this site), it was the side meetings with government officials that produced the best opportunities to influence government thinking. There were three such meetings that involved the Cowichan Valley Regional District directly.

### **Revisions to the Water Act**

In a pre-conference meeting on sustainable communities, a Ministry of Environment staff team spoke to the upcoming revisions to the provincial Water Act. A good deal of the discussion was about the initiative to regulate large scale uses of ground water, particularly in the light of the massive withdrawal of ground water by Nestle in the Fraser Valley, a huge commercial appropriation of a water source virtually for free. The issue of most importance to us was the promise that the draft legislation, to be circulated for comment later this fall, will contain provisions for a greater role for local communities in watershed management. When this becomes available the CVRD will circulate it widely. At the session I asked the speakers how one branch of the Ministry of Environment could be delivering all this “happy talk” about future collaboration with communities about watershed and source water safety when another branch of the same ministry was in the process of visiting a contaminated waste facility in our headwaters. I received a curt “no comment” to that question, not surprisingly given the current appeal process that is formally underway, but the message was not lost on the communities in attendance or the government.

### **Meeting with Minister Polak**

A CVRD team of Mayor John Lefebure, CAO Warren Jones and I had a meeting scheduled with Minister Polak to discuss our approach to watershed management. Unfortunately the minister had been called away due to a family emergency and was unavailable. We met instead with Deputy Minister Wes Shoemaker and Assistant Deputy Minister Jim Standen, the ADM in charge of Environmental Protection – the division responsible for the SIA permit decision. We had a very productive discussion with the Deputy in which we emphasized the desire of the CVRD to engage directly in the revisions to the water act, not just in response to a draft paper on legislative revisions, but as a co-designer of the collaboration process. We spoke of the potential for a region-wide watershed authority that is being contemplated,

one that would support the various individual watershed efforts in Shawnigan, Koksilah, Cowichan, Chemainus and other critical drainages in our region. We also suggested that the CVRD could act as a pilot region for implementation of the new act provisions. While the issue of the SIA permit hung over all of our heads, the provincial government is now, of necessity, silent on this matter while it works its way through the appeal process and potentially the Supreme Court. We will be asking for another opportunity to visit directly with the Minister.

### **Cabinet Panel on Responsible Resource Development**

The Cabinet panel consisted of Minister Coleman of LNG, Minister Bennett of Energy Mines, Minister Pymm of Agriculture, Minister Thompson of Forests Lands and Natural Resource Operations and Minister Rustad of Aboriginal Reconciliation. It was to include Minister Polak of Environment, but again she was dealing with the family emergency and could not attend. The panel began with statements from each minister about the Premier's instruction letters and the statement, endorsed by them all, that "all resource development in British Columbia was responsible". A polite silence and a few cynical chuckles greeted this version of the "happy talk" emanating from government. Notably, Minister Coleman, speaking about the prospects for LNG, referred to it as a "generational opportunity" akin to Premier WAC Bennett's development of dams and hydro-power. Minister Rustad gave a good account of his intention to promote reconciliation, an approach that was eloquently put and very well received.

In the question period I had the opportunity to raise the issue of cumulative effects, referring to my experience on the Forest Practices Board and with the pattern of issues faced by Shawnigan, with its multiple threats to the watershed and fragmented agency jurisdictions. I suggested that the time was now long overdue for creation of a comprehensive, multi-sector audit process for all resource activity and asked if there was any taste in government for such a process. Minister Thompson fielded that question, essentially agreeing that such a broader audit process would be consistent with the approach being taken by his ministry to create the "one land manager" model in resource management. Despite all the discussions it was abundantly clear that the direction of the current government is to promote ongoing resource development as a priority, with a focus on diversification into Asian markets, and that environmental concerns, while espoused in words, would be taking second place because we were "already doing such a good job".

The need for a comprehensive resource sector performance audit process is receiving growing recognition of major environmental NGO's and the Fraser Basin Council with one suggestion being the transformation of the Forest Practices Board into a Natural Resource Practices Board.

### **Interface Fire Management**

A clinic on interface fire management for communities contributed another insight that is worth noting. There has been a fund for creation of community wildfire

protection plans, funded by government and managed by the UBCM. The CVRD has one. The largest difficulty faced by the CVRD and other communities is that while there were funds for planning, there were little for practical fuel management work on the ground. What implementation funds were and remain available for land based treatments, requires a local commitment of a minimum of 10%. This confirmed the stated reason, at least in this sector, for Shawnigan to have a local source of funds to create the necessary leverage to gain access to infrastructure programs that often elude unincorporated electoral areas.