

## Infrastructure AM in BC: Transforming the phrase ‘sustainable service delivery’ into an actionable vision for local government

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Glen Brown has provided leadership at a provincial scale to transform the phrase ‘sustainable service delivery’ into an actionable vision for local government.



The phrase “asset management for sustainable service delivery” is now an accepted part of the local government vocabulary in British Columbia. The phrase was formalized with release of **Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery: A BC Framework** in December 2014, and rollout in 2015.

Transformational in its scope and vision for a desired outcome, this guidance document was the culmination of a multi-year process. It represents a personal and sustained commitment by Glen Brown, Chair of the Asset Management BC Partnership Committee, to “make it happen”.

What was the genesis of the phrase “sustainable service delivery”? A decade ago, what was the initial process for mainstreaming it? Both questions are addressed below in the retrospective written by Kim Stephens. He tells the story through a focus on the actions of Glen Brown as a key influencer in the world of government.

The article was originally published in April 2020 on the [waterbucket.ca](http://waterbucket.ca) website to celebrate the first decade of use of the term.

## Sustainable Service Delivery: Coining of the Term in June 2010

I remember the moment so well when Glen Brown first used the term ‘sustainable service delivery’ to capture what was in his mind. It was June 2010, and I was at the offices of the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN). John Finnie and I were on a phone call with Glen. The purpose was to develop Glen’s part in the agenda for the **Nanaimo Region Water Pricing Workshop**. At the time, Glen was an Executive Director in the provincial government; and John Finnie was General Manager, Regional and Community Utilities with the RDN.

Our conversation took place the week after Glen had given a presentation at the Leadership Forum organized by the Local Government Leadership Academy. His title was a long one: **Financial Accountability, Infrastructure Sustainability, Service Delivery: Connecting the Dots with an Asset Management Approach**. Nowhere in the presentation did Glen use the specific term ‘sustainable service delivery’.

During our brainstorming, Glen made repeated reference to the presentation; and expressed his desire to adapt it for the purposes of our upcoming event. As we talked, I kept pressing Glen to elaborate on what was in his mind so that John Finnie and I could help him crystallize a sound-bite for use as a compelling title.

There was an Ah-ha Moment and the penny dropped. Glen, John and I had a collective epiphany when we realized that Glen’s headline should be **What Does ‘Sustainable Service Delivery’ Mean to You?** That became the title for his workshop presentation.

In a nutshell, what happened during that conversation was that Glen Brown synthesized three ideas — *financial accountability, infrastructure sustainability, and service delivery* — into a single easy to remember phrase: “Sustainable Service Delivery”. The rest is history, as they say.

## It’s All About the Service

A decade later, I asked Glen about his recollections of why and how Sustainable Service Delivery clicked in his mind. He answered as follows:

“My inspiration came from Guy Felio, who is one of the original gurus of asset management, nationally. In his own words, and in a slide that I have seen him use in presentations since the mid-2000s, Guy Felio said, ‘It’s all about the service’.”

“Basically, well-maintained infrastructure/assets are worthless IF they do not provide a service. That is what resonated with me. Also, for any asset management approach to be successful, it must not focus on the infrastructure/asset by itself.”

“That way of thinking applies to nature and the environment, as well, as long as we fully understand and appreciate the value of natural services — particularly when we leverage natural services to provide traditional community services, as well as those that are provided to support a healthy environment — clean air, aquatic habitat, etc.,” concluded Glen Brown.

### Nanaimo Region Water Pricing Workshop

Part of the rollout to stimulate a national dialogue on sustainable water management, the Nanaimo Region Water Pricing Workshop in September 2010 was described by Oliver Brandes of POLIS (University of Victoria) as the first of its kind in Canada. The workshop program was a unique blend of research and practice. The workshop connected the dots between three initiatives:

- **Action for Water:** Implemented by the Regional District of Nanaimo, following approval in a referendum in November 2008.
- **Worth Every Penny:** A Primer on Conservation-oriented Water Pricing, co-authored by Oliver Brandes and released in May 2010.
- **Beyond the Guidebook 2010:** Implementing a New Culture for Urban Watershed Protection and Restoration in British Columbia, released by the Partnership for Water Sustainability in June 2010.

The desired outcome for the workshop was that participating practitioners would understand why ‘conservation-oriented water pricing’ is a tool to achieve a larger end: ‘sustainable service delivery’.

In a preview story published in summer 2010 about the workshop to prime our target audiences, I wrote that:

**“Sustainable service delivery is an emerging issue in BC. Changing and/or additional demands mean the local government workload is expanding. Local governments are being challenged to maintain and/or replace existing infrastructure over time, and to ‘do more with less’.”**

Unfortunately, Glen Brown took ill the night before the workshop. His presentation was delivered by Wally Wells, Executive Director of the then fledgling Asset Management BC. The significance of Glen not being able

to deliver his presentation, in person, meant that the formal unveiling of Sustainable Service Delivery in an outreach and professional development setting was delayed seven months until April 2011 when Glen was part of the faculty for the *Comox Valley Learning Lunch Seminar Series*.

This landmark series was initiated by the Partnership for Water Sustainability, hosted by the four Comox Valley local governments, and held under the umbrella of Convening for Action on Vancouver Island (CAVI).

### Comox Valley local governments embraced the vision for ‘A Regional Response to Infrastructure Liability’

The Nanaimo Region Water Pricing Workshop had ripple effects. This included inspiring the four Comox Valley local governments to change direction and build the 2011 Comox Valley Learning Lunch Seminar Series around the ‘sustainable service delivery’ theme. The annual series program provided peer-based education. Everyone was learning together.

Originally planned for the fall of 2010, the third annual Comox Valley Series was delayed until the spring of 2011. As an outcome of what they learned at the RDN workshop, the Comox Valley regional team shifted the spotlight from a ‘regional response to climate change’ to the financial challenges associated with replacement of aging municipal infrastructure. Climate change became a sub-theme.

### A Program for Peer-Based Education

Glen Brown was part of the faculty for the 2011 Comox Valley Series. He collaborated with the Comox Valley regional team to frame Sustainable Service Delivery in easy to understand terms.


Thanks to the early work of the newly formed Asset Management BC — a ‘community of practice’ initiative with provincial support and participation — local governments were starting to wrap their minds around the ‘20/80 Rule’, where the initial capital cost of municipal infrastructure is about 20% of the ultimate total cost, and the other 80% is an unfunded liability.

The 20/80 Rule provided context for the 2011 Comox Valley Series. Thus, the focus of the team was very much on what would be involved in facilitating the shift to a life-cycle approach to financing of infrastructure. Under Glen Brown’s guidance, the team embraced this explanation:

*Tackling the unfunded infrastructure liability involves a life-cycle way of thinking about infrastructure needs and how to pay for those needs over time. This holistic approach is described as Sustainable Service Delivery. The link between infrastructure asset management and the protection of a community's natural resources is emerging as an important piece in Sustainable Service Delivery.*

In 2011, Comox Valley local governments were early adopters of the vision for 'sustainable service delivery'. So much so, they delivered the program content for a 'CAVI Forum with the Summit' at the 2011 State of Vancouver Island Economic Summit. This event helped brand 'sustainable service delivery' as the wave of the future.

Connect the Dots: Financial Accountability, Infrastructure Sustainability & Service Delivery



"Money – it should be about how to get the most value out of every dollar spent. Too often, thinking stops after the capital investment is made. Yet everyone needs to be thinking in terms of life-cycle costs, including future recapitalization of the investment."

Glen Brown  
Province of BC  
September 2010

## When and where does the Asset Management process stop

*Wally Wells, P. Eng., Executive Director  
Asset Management BC*

### When

The question often comes up, when is asset management over or complete? As long as you own assets, never! The process is not static, but the inputs are constantly changing as assets are added, deleted, replaced, or upgraded. Asset management is a 'process' not a 'function'. Too often, we hear of asset management being treated as a separate discipline. It is not. We have managed assets for decades since the early days of our communities. The primary cause of the 'infrastructure gap' is that we operate on today's budgets without much attention to the ageing assets and future

requirements for replacement or renewal. Or at least that is the way we operated up until now.

### How

The asset management process provides the tools to address this gap and hopefully prevent the gap from growing by planning, methodically, for the short and long term. The BC Framework is deliberately titled, "Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery: A BC Framework". The operative word is 'sustainable' — both economically and physically. Our assets exist to provide a service. As an Australian associate once said, 'an asset without a user is an asset without value.'

### Where

The 'where' question is "Where do we exit the asset management process if the process is continuous?" The asset management process is a decision tool that assists in defining the needed projects, be they new assets or replacement, upgrades or rehabilitation of existing assets such as repaving a roadway, a facility roof replacement or rehabilitating a pump station. These projects are reflected in the capital works budget. At this point, once a specific project is defined, the project exits the asset management process until the project is completed. Once complete, the new or refurbished asset re-enters the asset management process with new or updated information. This is consistent with what our finance personnel do with the project to meet the reporting needs of PSAB 3150.

The City of Courtenay defined a project engineering and management group as part of their structure, specifically tasked with taking projects through design, construction, start-up, and delivery back to operating departments for continued asset use, operations, and maintenance. That project group interfaces closely with the finance personnel to meet all financial accounting, contract procedures, and reporting requirements of the projects.


There are guidelines for input to the asset management process for different professionals within their expertise. There are also guidelines for project management and construction. All are relevant but the start and stop point of each is an important differentiation in project delivery.

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Joel Shaw - (two quotes) City of Kelowna

*"We don't know what the future looks like, but what we do know is we can lean on the foundation that we have developed over the last number of years. Our Asset Management has allowed us to make informed decisions."*

*"With good Asset Management programs, we can understand all the projects and capital works and improvement works we need to do. We already have an extensive list of projects that are shovel ready to go tomorrow if we have to."*



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