

# Green Infrastructure: Past and Future

BY KIM A STEPHENS AND RÉMI DUBÉ



**W**hen you think of the issues we face today — weather extremes, drying rivers, degraded streams, frequent wildfires, population growth, housing affordability — they are no different than they were in the 1990s and the 2000s. They are just more complex and more urgent.

## THE GEORGIA BASIN INITIATIVE LEGACY

With hindsight and perspective, 1994 represents a watershed moment in the history of the Lower Mainland and east coast of Vancouver Island. The bioregion was at a crossroads and faced critical choices: “Will it be development that controls us or development that sustains us?”

As a foundation piece for its response, the provincial government of the day launched the Georgia Basin Initiative in partnership with local governments. The influence of the Georgia Basin Initiative is intergenerational. It spawned initiatives and programs flourishing today.

The legacy program is the Georgia Basin Inter-Regional Education Initiative (IREI), launched in 2012 as a successor program, and led by the Partnership for Water Sustainability. Three decades and counting is an amazing legacy.

The Chronicle of Green Infrastructure Innovation in Metro Vancouver is a sweeping narrative of an exciting period in local government “convening for action” history. The Chronicle is about elected leaders and a host of others who rose to the moment and championed the “mission possible” goal: settlement, economy, and ecology in balance!

## A REGIONAL TEAM APPROACH

What’s in a word and/or a phrase? Regional approaches have been around for decades. However,

in 2008 insertion of the word team in “regional approach” changed everything in terms of what “convening for action” means in practice. Team implies there is personal commitment; it also suggests there is a game plan and a coachable context. Success ultimately depends on the right players being in the right places at the right time, and over time.

The Regional Team Approach is founded on partnerships and collaboration and seeks to align efforts at three scales — provincial, regional and local — for the common good. Everyone needs to agree on expectations and how all the players will work together. After that, each community can reach its goals in its own way.

Collaborative leadership across boundaries is powerful. Champions bring essential ingredients for mission impact, notably: passion, commitment, perseverance. Collaboration is energizing. Collaboration creates critical mass. Collaboration overcomes barriers and enables practices that would sustain communities, not control them.

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST INFORM THE FUTURE

The Chronicle started out as a chronology of “convening for action” events. And then it grew into something bigger in scope. Through a conversational interview process, the stories behind the story came into focus. The Chronicle weaves quotable quotes into a 700-page storyline. It serves as a legacy resource for the past three decades. The Chronicle is a tome!

The passage of time provides perspective. And awareness of time and place helps answer this two-part question: What did we learn along the way and where did that lead each time? Themes emerged. Four distinct eras define the past three decades of experience in the Metro Vancouver region, with the period of time for each varying between six and nine years.

Over time, the region has regressed from a situation where many things were in alignment to one where few are in alignment. A post-pandemic reality is organizational amnesia compounded by more and more information but less and less knowledge and understanding.

Today’s frontline staff are finding it more difficult to share their knowledge and vision, perhaps due to a political climate that is less receptive to data-based solutions.

## WITH A NETWORK, EVERYONE GOES FURTHER

Deep knowledge is being ignored or dismissed at an alarming rate. Our world seems to be getting more wobbly, more unstable, more uncertain, and for all sorts of reasons. Storytelling is needed more than ever. It matters how we share information to ensure concepts are conveyed to, and understood by, the people who need to know. Solutions to the issues of our time lie in WHAT stories we tell and HOW we tell those stories.

Frontline staff in local government need safe spaces where they can...one, tap into insights from alumni who are retired from leadership positions...and two, share experiences with their peers as a way to turn problems into solutions. This is exactly what the our Partnership did this past January. We hosted a “safe space forum” for conversations between past, current and future leaders.

In planning the forum, our goal was to foster strong connections among the attendees. We did not want this gathering to be like many professional gatherings where interactions are polite, efficient, but surface level. We deliberately planned exercises that focused on listening, learning, and reflection.

## THE WAY FORWARD

“Work is easier, more effective, and more fun when people work in community with each other,” states Berkeley University’s Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern, network leadership thought leader.

The Partnership mission is to build a network that fosters support in developing solutions to today’s water sustainability challenges. These range from sharing accurate, scientifically grounded knowledge to weeding through political agendas and misinformation; and from the status quo to embracing a holistic, environmentally sound wisdom.

The takeaway message is that we can support each other to make everyone’s work easier by creating a knowledge network. In these busy times, there is tremendous value in networks to help solve problems together. We are all yearning for cooperation that will help buttress this wobbly world. **CB**

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