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Climate Change Action Charter and Community Sustainability in a Dollars and Cents Kind of World

by *Tim Pringle*

In 2007 the provincial government in BC launched the Climate Action Charter (CAC) initiative. With clear goals and a methodology for measuring progress towards these goals, the CAC encourages local governments to take positive action on an issue that affects all of us. To date, 174 of 187 local governments across BC have signed onto this voluntary initiative.

The "uptake" on the voluntary CAC is significant to us at the [Real Estate Foundation of BC](#). We look at land from several perspectives: long term stewardship, the impact of policy on land uses, and the way these values are reflected in market activity, among them. Over the past 20 years this has crystallized into what I think of as balancing settlement activities with the ecological integrity of the land base. One of the big challenges has been to establish a shared metric: measuring what matters. The CAC gives land use practitioners a metric that is widely accepted as one of the measures of "sustainability": green house gas emissions (GHGs).

The Foundation has been approached by some local governments to help them address their CAC goals. Specific GHGs projects have not, to date, been part of our mandate. Having said this, it is important to note that the Foundation and CIT are involved in projects that will reduce GHGs. Many CIT community partners are involved in sustainability planning, growth management planning, or water management planning. These will have an impact on reducing GHGs. In turn, this will help their communities meet CAC goals.

A couple of examples:

The Nicola Watershed Community Round Table is currently producing a Water Use Management Plan for the arid Nicola Valley. This largely rural area, with one urban centre at Merritt, depends on surface water to recharge ground water reserves. The valley faces the challenge of providing water for urban and agricultural needs. Basically, they are looking at ways to conserve water usage in both sectors so that water supply can be available for a certain



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COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION INFORMATION RESOURCE

Communities in Transition (CIT) was a signature program of the Real Estate Foundation of BC from 2004-2010. CIT was created to help increase the ability of non-metropolitan communities to address the challenges they face when planning for use and conservation of lands. For information about CIT program goals and online resources associated with CIT initiatives, please visit the Initiatives section of the [Foundation's website](#).

Note: This site is now an archive, available for information and interest only. The Real Estate Foundation is not maintaining the blog function.

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- ▶ [2010](#) (42)
- ▼ [2009](#) (49)
 - ▶ [November](#) (12)

amount of settlement growth and expansion of the agriculture sector. This becomes a land use question and a GHGs issue because one of the ways for the City of Merritt to become more efficient with its water usage is to become more compact. Sprawling growth uses water inefficiently. Construction practices also have an impact. Concrete-based building practices require a significantly higher water usage - for cement production, as well as for building and clean-up - than wood-frame construction. The province's new building code, which allows for wood-frame construction up to six storeys, will have an impact on water usage. LEED or equivalent standards for building and development also address water usage. These are important elements in a broader sustainable development approach that will reduce GHGs.

Water consumption is not directly a big factor in GHG emission, but what water serves definitely is. Everything that goes on in the urban, built environment uses water. That kind of connection is not yet, however, understood very well by communities. A more direct connect is the consequence of not reducing GHGs. In an already arid area like the Nicola Valley, summers will become drier and hotter, and demand on water will increase. As the Nicola Valley goes through its water management planning exercise a number of factors like this will come up for discussion. I anticipate seeing positive changes to how places like Merritt deal with built-form and density issues.

An example of where this is starting to happen is the Comox Valley. The area is going through several regional processes to support planning; one is the Regional Sustainability Plan (RSP). The consultancy working on this RSP has put together a [sustainable development strategy document](#) that is viewable at the [Comox Valley Regional District website](#). Within that (*on page 3*) is a very useful and instructive "sustainable development matrix." Using the matrix you can see how certain actions or tools lead to a range of results. Reducing or recycling water, for example, becomes a Climate Action Charter related activity. Raising height restrictions in urban areas reduces the community carbon footprint. The City of Courtenay has recently approved zones that allow for six-storey buildings, part of their contribution to their climate change strategy. If the market responds, given the new building code, this will likely result in six-storey wood-frame construction. This will give Courtenay a denser footprint, and residential locations more oriented to transit. This is part of using a matrix for sustainability, using relevant development policy and design, which in turn has an impact on water consumption and other GHG related factors.

Many communities (and many CIT projects) haven't made the direct connection to CAC goals. For example, the [Lake Windemere project](#) in the Kootenays does not explicitly refer to the CAC. Connecting land use and development decisions to the health and ecological integrity of the lake, however, will feedback into choices that will contribute to local government CAC planning. Less sprawl is a benefit to the lake; it also has implications for GHG emissions. Groundwater recharge is important to the lake. Higher densities in areas that have already experienced interruptions to the natural hydrology, rather than disturbing un-interrupted systems —this also has an impact on both lake ecology and GHG emissions. Again, it's a built-form footprint issue.

Ultimately, it's a dollars and cents kind of world. For property owners and the real estate industry, the CAC should also have a positive impact. What I'm seeing suggests that, over time, strong sustainability plans and climate action plans ought to influence property values positively. Communities with strong plans will have stronger property values than those that don't. The actions that flow out of these plans — actions on climate change adaptation and mitigation — are an investment in sustaining community and neighbourhood

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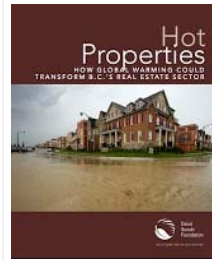
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quality of life.

In a very few years I can imagine that a real estate agent will be saying to a prospective client, "Our community has a very active Climate Change Action Mitigation plan. And, by the way, this is giving us a better range of household choices, and we're doing a good job of protecting our open spaces, and we know our watersheds are going to remain healthy." In short, communities taking these steps are moving on a range of things that will give a salesperson competitive advantage over someone in a neighbouring community that hasn't taken these steps.

Climate change and settlement choices are having an impact on the ecological systems on which our communities depend. One can imagine a number of negative possibilities. Some of these will become unfortunate truths for those places that don't adjust, that don't put their overall settlement



activities into the context of a sustainability plan.

Hot Properties, a report published by the [Real Estate Institute of BC](#) in 2007, does a very good job of describing the problem.

Wouldn't it be terrible if, in say 40 years, your community was having problems with ground water and people were losing property value because of a lack of assurance that there wasn't adequate water? Or, it was extremely expensive because of the cost of water-servicing and management,

encouraging people to look elsewhere to live just because it was too expensive?

Strategies that reduce GHGs are positive sustainability strategies. The cumulative impact of actions that local governments take to reduce their GHGs will have a big, and measureable, impact on the ecological integrity of the land base. While it is important to note that CAC planning is an element of sustainability planning, it is not a replacement for it. Because it provides goals and metrics, we see the CAC as an important; it leverages and encourages integrated sustainability planning and land uses. These outcomes have been of great interest to the Real Estate Foundation for most of its 21 years of grant-making.

Resources:

- [Climate Action Charter](#)
- [Livesmart BC](#)
- [BC Climate Action Toolkit Website](#)
- [BC Green Choices](#)
- [Local Government and Climate Change: Current Law and Urgent Action \(UBC Robson Square, Vancouver, March 6, 2009\)](#)
- [Hot properties: How global warming could transform BC's real estate](#)

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