



the partnership
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on April 26, 2022
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

**Living Water Smart
in British Columbia:
*Asset management is an
awkward term and
confuses everyone***

Note to Reader:

[Waterbucket eNews](#)¹ celebrates the leadership of individuals and organizations who are guided by the vision for [Living Water Smart in British Columbia](#)².

The edition published on April 26, 2022 featured an essay by Wally Wells, Executive Director of Asset Management BC. By focusing on the distinction between a “plan” and a “strategy”, Wally’s storyline goes to the heart of output-oriented versus outcome-oriented approaches.

The umbrella for Partnership initiatives and programs is the [Water Sustainability Action Plan for British Columbia](#)³. In turn, the Action Plan is nested within [Living Water Smart, British Columbia’s Water Plan](#).



Cover Image Credit: photo by David Mackenzie,
a *Lifetime Member* of the Partnership for Water Sustainability

¹ <https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

² https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart_book.pdf

³ <https://www.waterbucket.ca/cfa/sites/wbccfa/documents/media/81.pdf>

Editor's Perspective

A conversation with Wally Wells is always fun. It is not just that he is enthusiastic and passionate about asset management which some might consider a dry topic. Wally is a deep thinker and draws on many, many decades of experience to put engineering practices in context.

When Wally Wells asked me to read **What's in a WORD: The word 'Plan'**, his storyline resonated. Time and again in my career, I have observed a pattern much like what Wally describes in his article. All too often, our engineering profession takes a seemingly simple concept or idea, surrounds it with layers of complexity, and ultimately confuses everyone.



Asset management is an awkward term and confuses everyone

By focusing on the distinction between a **“plan”** and a **“strategy”**, Wally's article goes to the heart of output-oriented versus outcome-oriented approaches. That is the takeaway message. Wally Wells has done a public service by drawing attention to the need to retrain elected representatives to look at “plans” differently and think about risks and consequences for the community because of a Council doing or not doing things.

The issue of **“output versus outcome”** is one that the provincial government first identified two decades ago when it released [Stormwater Planning: A Guidebook for British Columbia](#). The Guidebook premise is that a focus on desired outcomes would lead to action, whereas a focus on output leads to “analysis paralysis”. Living Water Smart in British Columbia is outcome oriented.

"ASSET MANAGEMENT BC AND THE PARTNERSHIP FOR WATER SUSTAINABILITY ARE COLLABORATING TO CONNECT THE DOTS BETWEEN ASSET MANAGEMENT AND WATER SUSTAINABILITY. EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW THAT THE TIME TO SHAPE FUTURE LIFE-CYCLE COSTS IS AT THE COMMUNITY PLANNING FRONT-END. OUR MESSAGE IS EXPLICIT: GET IT RIGHT AT THE FRONT-END; AVOID A LIABILITY."

- WALLY WELLS

The complementary efforts of Asset Management BC, the Partnership for Water Sustainability and our local government partners are operationalizing some of the 45 provincial actions spelled out in [Living Water Smart, British Columbia's Water Plan](#). These actions are the foundation for a whole-system, adaptive approach to connecting the Built and Natural environments through [Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery: A BC Framework](#).

In 2019, the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs established an expectation that grant applicants would integrate natural assets into their asset management strategies. And to quote Wally Wells, asset management is a continuous process, not a discrete task, whether the assets are constructed or natural.

The Partnership contribution is to show local governments how they can integrate stream systems and water assets (such as wetlands) into their asset management budgets. Our commitment to the BC Framework is reflected and embodied in the [Sustainable Creekshed Systems through Asset Management](#) initiative.



*Kim A. Stephens, MEng, PEng,
Executive Director*

*Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC
April 2022*



What's in a WORD: The word 'Plan'

The Partnership for Water Sustainability and Asset Management BC share common interests and are jointly operationalizing lynchpin action items identified in Living Water Smart in British Columbia. Our shared commitment to Living Water Smart actions provides the foundation for collaboration goals that are defined in a Memorandum of Understanding.

The umbrella for collaboration is [Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery: A BC Framework](#), released in December 2014 by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) through Asset Management BC.

An over-arching goal of collaboration is to advance a mutually supporting approach that profiles and raises awareness of the guiding philosophy, principles and objectives embodied in the BC Framework. This includes publishing articles by each other. Today, we feature a reflective essay by Wally Wells, Executive Director of Asset Management BC.

Wally Wells is an original thinker. In the Asset Management BC Newsletter, he has a column titled What's in a WORD. In it, he draws attention to how we use (or perhaps misuse) words. The Winter 2022 issue of the newsletter includes Wally's article about the word 'Plan'.

What is the story behind the story?

"An issue we have in communicating our message often seems to relate to the use and interpretation or misinterpretation of words or phrases. Too often we use technical terms within our own skill sets, not appreciating that others may not know what we are really saying," explains Wally Wells.

"In asset management and other areas, we use language different from what common language is that everyone understands, or specific disciplines understand a word or phrase differently."

"Asset Management, itself, is an intimidating term. The process of asset management or 'managing assets', is not new. The process, as defined today, just leads to better decisions across the entire organization for priority setting with limited budgets. However, we have succeeded in confusing everyone," concludes Wally Wells.

"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."

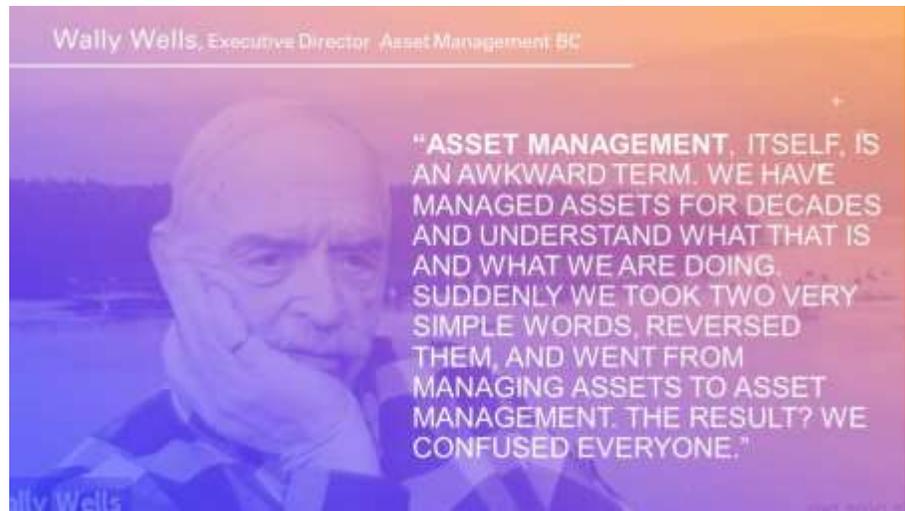
-Wally Wells



Branding logo for **Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery: A BC Framework, 2014**

What's in a WORD: Do you know what the word 'Plan' means in a local government context and wonder whether it is appropriate for infrastructure Asset Management?

Reflections by Wally Wells, Asset Management BC



This column addresses our language of asset management and the use of terms. Do we use them correctly or are we creating a new language and meaning when it is not necessary? Is this part of our communications problem? I think so. Based on dialogue with many, this article reflects the writer's observations of what we see and hear.

"Asset Management", itself, is an awkward term. We have managed assets for decades and understand what that is and what we are doing. Suddenly we took two very simple words, reversed them, and went from managing assets to asset management. The result? We confused everyone.

Too much attention is given to only the Asset Management Plan as opposed to all elements of the process. Even then, should we be calling the outcome the 'Asset Management Plan'? It is likely too late to change our words, but we do need to be careful in how we communicate what we do and what the expectations are with the results.

The risk and consequences of not taking action for infrastructure renewal are substantially higher and more consequential than for Master Plans which are “futures” documents

What is a Master Plan, really?

A Plan usually talks about things in the future with choices on both potential services, assets to provide the service, costs and timing premised often on growth assumptions.

These are usually called Master Plans and are related to specific services or asset classes. For decades, we have trained our elected officials to understand the decision process and flexibility available for them when presented with a Master Plan.

In a ‘futures’ document, based on existing inventory and services premised on growth and growth strategies of what MIGHT be needed, the Master Plan defines and documents the options and cost to do so and when the service/ assets will be required to be operational.

Councils have choices of doing or not doing the recommended activities based on growth and service needs. There is often few consequences and little risk in doing or not doing the suggested activities.

Life-cycle context for asset replacement over time

The same flexibility, risk and consequences of a decision are not the same with the Asset Management Plan. The plan, other than based on “futures”, is based on existing services and service levels. So why call it a plan?

The Asset Management 'plan' addresses life cycle assets related to the service they provide and the basis for capital replacement and/ or upgrade over time, a very different set of circumstances.

The risk and consequences of not taking action are substantially higher and more consequential than the Master Plans described above.



Asset Management is a Strategy, not a Plan

An AM plan is not the same as a master plan. There are two parts to an AM Plan. The first is the inventory, condition assessment, and estimated life of assets translated into the cost both in dollars and time to renew, upgrade or decommission.

At this point it does not deal with resources available and the ability to pay. It just deals with what is need to continue to provide EXISTING services at an existing level. The second part of the "plan" is not a plan but a strategy document. Instead of choices, it deals with the risk and consequences to the community of doing or not doing things.

Something completely different

For decades we have trained our elected officials how to think and what to do with a plan. But now, with the Asset Management Plan, we want them to do something completely different. No wonder they are confused. The decision from the AM plan and strategy are tested against service with risk and consequences.



Understand the Local Government Context

THE basic document for most communities is the Official Plan, often a legislative requirement. While that PLAN documents existing land use and activities at a point in time, its purpose is to contemplate how and where land will be used, altered or protected within the boundaries of the community and sets out the basis for zoning by-laws and land development or redevelopment. Outside of the documentation of existing uses, it deals with the future that may or may not occur or will be altered.

Master plans give Councils choices: Special purpose plans, those normally called MASTER PLANS often exist for things like transportation, culture, parks and recreation including facilities, water, sewer and drainage.

Outside of the inventory and documentation of existing circumstances and services, they address development of FUTURE systems, facilities and uses and/ or maintaining, adding or altering levels of service in accordance with land use.

Council have choices to do, alter or not do suggested strategies and activities. Most decision are made on financial terms and affordability.

In contrast to a master plan

This is NOT the case with the Asset Management Plan. There really are not choices available to Council on doing or not doing without substantial risk and consequences. If a Council decided not to carry out the work, they risk reducing or compromising EXISTING services.

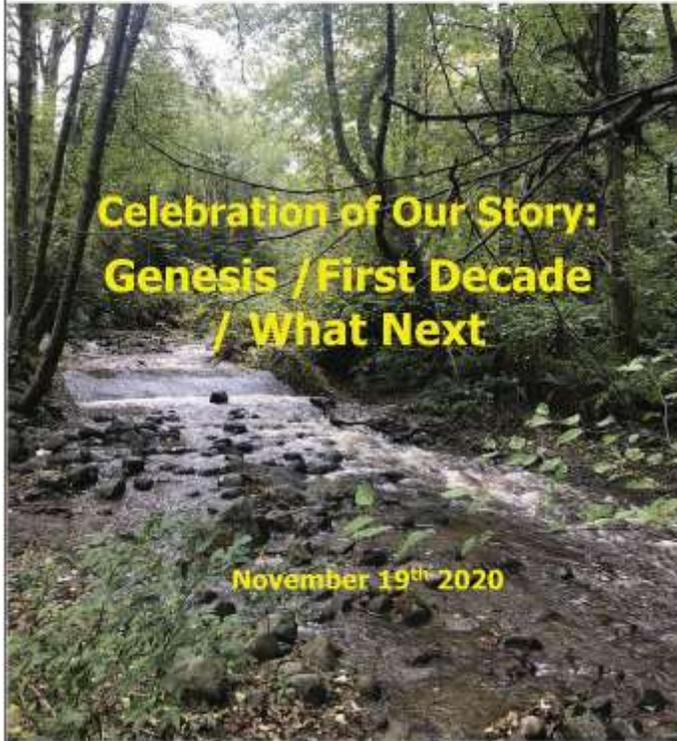
So, different than the other plans, referenced above, it is not a matter of doing or not doing but a matter of when, at what cost and retaining, reducing or enhancing existing services. This plan has little to do with community growth.

Towards re-training of elected representatives

Our approach to communicating with Council what to do with the plan and recommendation is extremely important as we are really retraining them. Keep this in mind when you present your “PLAN” to Council.



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TO LEARN MORE, VISIT:

<https://waterbucket.ca/about-us/>

About the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia

Incorporation of the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia as a not-for-profit society on November 19, 2010 was a milestone moment. Incorporation signified a bold leap forward.

Over two decades, the Partnership had evolved from a technical committee in the 1990s, to a “water roundtable” in the first decade of the 2000s, and then to a legal entity. The Partnership has its roots in government – local, provincial, federal.

The Partnership has a primary goal, to **build bridges of understanding** and pass the baton from the past to the present and future. To achieve the goal, the Partnership is growing a network in the local government setting. This network embraces collaborative leadership and **inter-generational collaboration**.

The Partnership believes that when each generation is receptive to accepting the inter-generational baton and embracing the wisdom that goes with it, the decisions of successive generations will benefit from and build upon the experience of those who went before them.



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