



# the partnership for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on November 1, 2022

<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

## Living Water Smart in British Columbia:

*A sense of purpose is  
powerful motivation*



## Note to Reader:

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

The edition published on November 1, 2022 is the *story behind the story* of how fixing a traffic problem at a major intersection morphed into a signature environmental and economic development project. This happened because the City of Nanaimo has a culture of commitment to community, risk-taking and innovation.

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



Cover Image Credit: photo by Bill Sims, City of Nanaimo

<sup>1</sup> <https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart\\_book.pdf](https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart_book.pdf)

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

## Editor's Perspective

Listening to Bill Sims tells the story of the Midtown Gateway Project, I found his narrative to be compelling. This is great stuff, I thought. He provides a window into the people side of local government. In the process, he highlights a guiding principle which is commitment to a higher purpose, something called the **common good**.

The "story behind the story" is structured in two parts. In Part One, Bill Sims provides a project overview. In Part Two, he elaborates on the risk-taking culture within the City of Nanaimo. First, however, I urge readers to reflect on the following words of wisdom that Bill Sims shared with me. These thoughts establish context for his story.

**"A key is that individuals have a long-term commitment to the community in which they live and work." – Bill Sims**

### Why the Midtown Gateway Project?

Bill Sims says, "you follow your interest, and you follow your sense of what is right and in the best interests of the community. You work that, and as you bring people along, things become a reality."

"That is what happened here in Nanaimo with the Midtown Gateway Project. It was a whole bunch of staff who saw the value in this project. They kept working at it and pretty soon it became a reality."

"In a risk-taking context, bringing forward an expensive project is uncomfortable for people. But once you have built a head of steam, and other staff members are on board, the project becomes more accepted."

"And every time you are asked, why are we spending so much money, the answer is that it has evolved into a multi-faceted project. It began as let's fix the capacity problem at Bowen and Northfield. Now it is a signature environmental and economic development project."

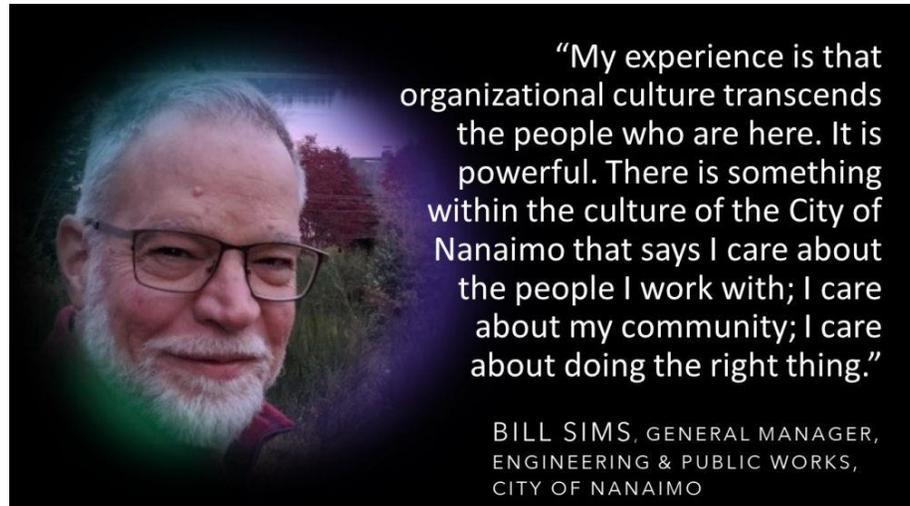


*Kim A. Stephens, MEng, PEng,  
Executive Director*

*Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC  
November 2022*



**"The City of Nanaimo has a culture of commitment to community, risk-taking and innovation. But you really see the effect of good governance on the willingness to take risks." - Bill Sims**



The Midtown Gateway Project in the City of Nanaimo is transforming a legacy brownfield site impacted by past industrial activity into a revitalized neighbourhood gateway. It features new complete street transportation corridors, a restored and naturalized wetland with public walking trails, and enhanced access to the city's premier recreation complex - Beban Park.

There are two stories behind this story. One is the technical story about how fixing a traffic problem morphed into a signature environmental and economic development project that achieved multiple beneficial outcomes. Even more compelling, however, is the story of the corporate culture within the City of Nanaimo which made the project possible.

There are several dimensions to the "story behind the story" of the corporate culture. First, the organization has historically embraced risk-taking because the guiding philosophy is "let's do it right". Secondly, there is the enduring resiliency of the organization.

**“THE MIDTOWN GATEWAY PROJECT IS A CASE OF CITY STAFF COMING TOGETHER AND SAYING HOW DO WE DO THIS, AND HOW DO WE DO IT RIGHT?” – BILL SIMS**

## Midtown Gateway Project

Bowen Road is a heavily used north-south corridor that connects downtown Nanaimo with central and north Nanaimo. After the Nanaimo Parkway (Island Highway) was constructed in 1997, the intersection of Bowen and Northfield soon became the busiest city-owned intersection. People use Northfield to get to and from the Nanaimo Parkway. The result is major traffic congestion.

The Midtown Gateway Project evolved from trying to solve a traffic problem at a busy intersection to cleaning up a legacy contaminated site from the coal mining era. A culture of risk taking has enabled the City of Nanaimo to resolve the traffic problem, restore a legacy brownfield, create a natural asset, open up a desirable area for a \$70 million signature development, and recover its upfront costs.

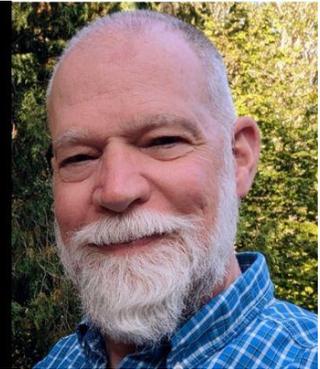


## STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

# The leveraging effect of respect and good governance on willingness to take risks within local government

"There is another piece to the story of the Midtown Gateway project," says Bill Sims. "I am a big subscriber of start with the end in mind. But when we started with this project, we did not have this end in mind. Long story short, doing what is right opened up a number of opportunities."

"The Midtown Gateway Project is the headline grabber. But the real story is the resilience of the City of Nanaimo corporate culture. Your own level of resilience determines how quickly an individual or an organization rebounds from adversity." – Bill Sims



## PART ONE: Midtown Gateway Project exemplifies risk-taking in practice

"The project started as a how do we fix the traffic problems that we have at Bowen and Northfield. The traditional engineering solution is build more lanes. But the intersection is constrained for a variety of reasons."

"Over time, the concept evolved to extend a connector road parallel to Bowen, bypass the problem intersection and create a new one further to the north. But the alignment went right through a former wetland that had been filled with coal mining waste, construction debris, and all kinds of nasty stuff."

"The question was, how do we improve this property so that the city can use it for traffic as well as create some good in the world?"

## Why we are doing this project

"The corporation has this underlying culture of commitment to its community and innovation. When we have good governance at the Council level, that seems to allow staff a sense of freedom to live up to their responsibility, with creativity. In other words, take risks, although not in a financial sense; rather, risk-taking in thinking creatively," Bill Sims emphasizes.

"And so, what is the right thing to do? In this case, it was recognizing that the legacy industrial wasteland was not going to be redeveloped any time soon. The land value would not justify private investment. And we had our own challenges with traffic. Let's think outside the box, we said."

"It was an expensive piece of property to purchase and remediate. But it still is the right thing to do. Nobody else was going to go to this level of remediation and create a wetland. And nobody else was going to put this into the overall mobility context."

"Public investment in this area unlocked so much good – between improved transportation for all modes, restitution of a brownfield, immediate private investment in surrounding lands along with future potential."

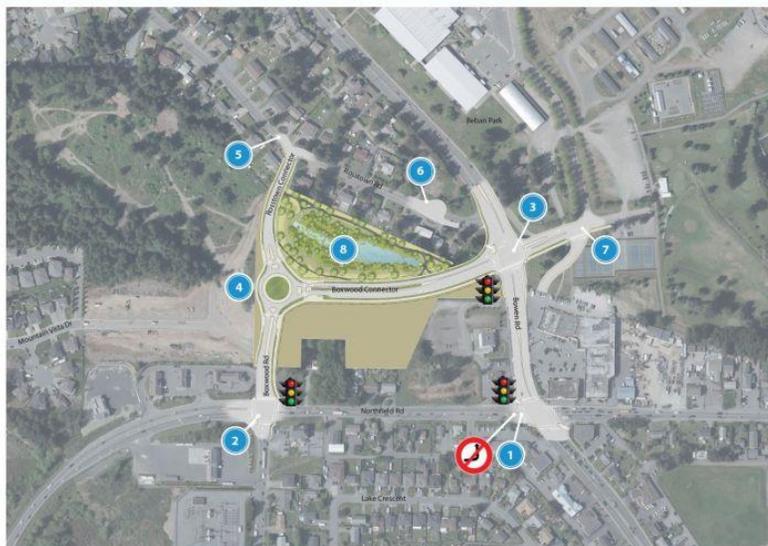
"This is a case of a number of staff coming together and saying how do we do this, and how do we do it right?"

## THE BOXWOOD CONNECTOR

PHASE II: Road & Utility Construction (scheduled for 2022)

### Proposed Improvements

- 1 Upgrades to intersection of Bowen & Northfield to increase level of service
  - 2 Upgrades to intersection of Northfield & Boxwood to divert traffic & increase level of service
  - 3 New signalized intersection
  - 4 New roundabout
  - 5 New connection to Rosstown Road
  - 6 Close Rosstown & Bowen intersection
  - 7 New access to Beban Park & potential new access to Beban Plaza
  - 8 New trails & amenities in public space
  - 9 New bike lanes, multi-use paths & transit stops
-  Traffic Signal Co-ordination
  -  Remove left hand turns



For more information:  [www.nanaimo.ca/goto/BoxwoodConnector](http://www.nanaimo.ca/goto/BoxwoodConnector)

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## **PART TWO: City Council empowered commitment to the community, enabling staff creativity and innovation to emerge**

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"The City of Nanaimo has a culture of commitment to community and innovation. But you really see the effect of good governance on the willingness to take risks," reflected Bill Sims.

"In situations of poor governance, the momentum of the organization grinds to a halt. It is discouraging. However, the people who stay retain their sense of commitment. My experience is that the organizational culture transcends the people who are here. It is powerful."

### **A sense of purpose is powerful motivation**

"There is something within the culture of the City of Nanaimo that says I care about the people I work with; I care about my community; I care about doing the right thing. It is a sense of higher purpose that most of the staff seem to carry with them. During times of good governance, creativity re-emerges, and the momentum of the organization accelerates."

"When Council is very careful to be respectful of staff, and always to be respectful in their own debates, it is startling how positive the effect is on the organization. Two things are in play. One is the corporate culture that seems to transcend the people who work for the city at any given time. And the other is the leveraging effect of governance on that culture," concludes Bill Sims.

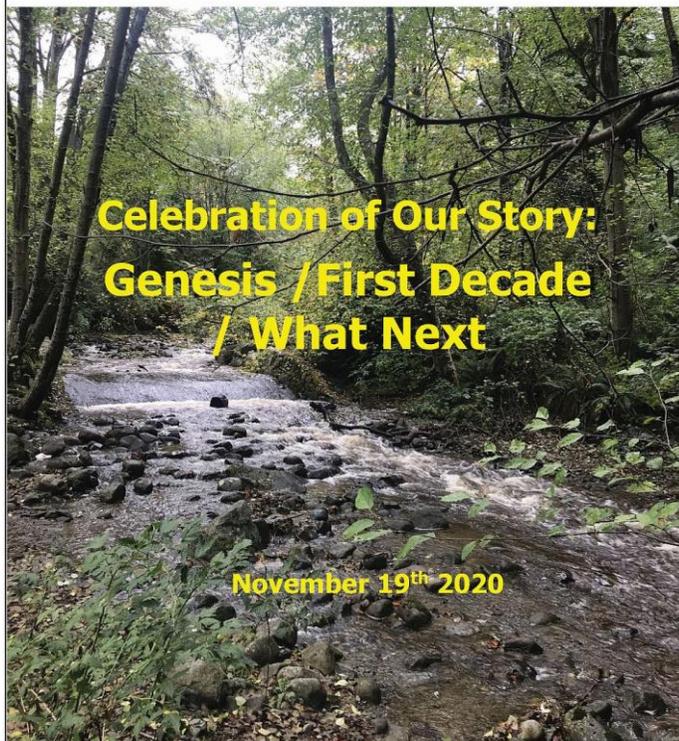
“People who live, work and play on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw people are committed to this community, this place and each other.”

Bill Sims, City of Nanaimo  
General Manager  
Engineering & Public Works





the partnership  
for water sustainability in bc



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TO LEARN MORE, VISIT:

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

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## About the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia

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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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**the partnership**  
for water sustainability in bc