



the partnership  
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on May 30, 2023  
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

# Living Water Smart in British Columbia:

***Moving Towards  
Sustainable Service Delivery  
in the Comox Valley***

## 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 May 30, 2023 featured the story behind the story of the “experiment in collaboration” involving the four local governments in the Comox Valley over the past two decades. The Partnership's hope is that having this record of their oral history will serve to inform and inspire future generations of local government staffs.

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](#).



<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>

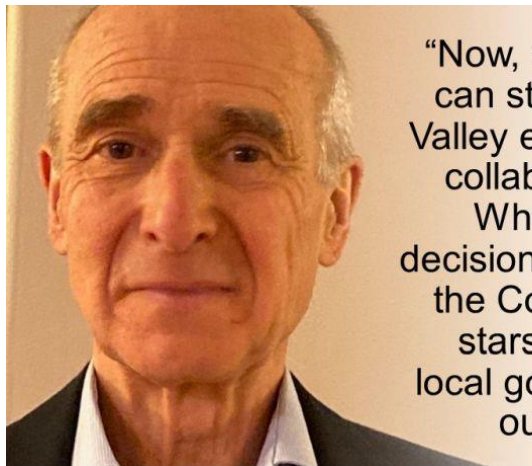
## Editor's Perspective

The guest Editor's Perspective for this edition is contributed by Derek Richmond, Partnership Director and Comox Valley resident. He is a former Manager of Engineering with the City of Courtenay and Past-Chair (2011-2014) of the [CAVI-Convening for Action on Vancouver Island](#) program.

*"I carried on what I brought with me from my legacy at Alberta Environment. And that was always the issue of going beyond your localized boundaries and finding out who was doing what and where. Somebody, somewhere, had found a solution to something. And it was through meetings, contacts, and a regular forum that you found those answers," states Derek Richmond*

*Derek Richmond's experience with Alberta Environment was foundational to what he brought to the City of Courtenay and CAVI. In Alberta, he was responsible for the maintenance and operation of all provincial water resource projects, with the exception of irrigation.*

*Kim A. Stephens, Executive Director  
Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC*



"Now, with the passage of time, we can state the obvious. The Comox Valley experiment is a success. The collaborative spirit has taken root. When the Partnership made the decision to concentrate our efforts in the Comox Valley, we believed the stars were in alignment. The four local governments have shown that our faith in them was justified."

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### Story of the Comox Valley journey is a legacy resource for local government collaboration

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"Knowledge is passed on verbally and we learn through stories. This is the big picture context for the Partnership for Water Sustainability initiative in creating this legacy resource. Thus, this story behind the story of the region's journey through time is the Partnership's gift to the four Comox Valley local governments."

"It is our hope that having this record of their oral history - because that is what it is - will serve to inform and inspire future generations of local government staffs. At the end of the day, there are three takeaway messages from this successful experiment in collaboration."



## **Message #1 – Each local government has contributed something of value to the big picture**

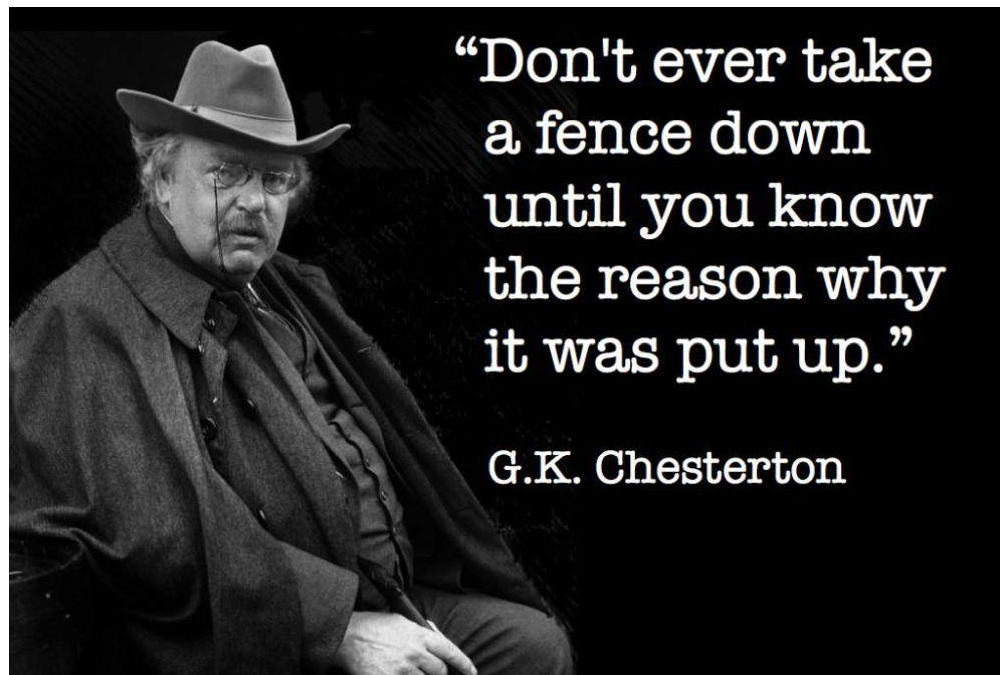
Everyone cannot do everything. What really stands out about the Comox Valley is that each local government has developed an area of expertise or strength that is provincially significant. The combination is potentially quite powerful in terms of shaping the future of the valley. But only if there is an enduring commitment to walk the talk.

## **Message #2 – Collaboration is the gift that keeps on giving over time**

Collaboration helps everyone better deliver on policy goals and outcomes. But one has to believe, truly believe, in collaboration to make it so. Lip service does not cut it. What this means is that collaboration must be embedded in an organization's culture. There is no other way. It must be a commitment, a guiding principle.

## **Message #3 - Understand the WHY!**

Collaboration is all well and good as a desire. But it must be founded on an understanding of oral history in order to pass the baton. For lack of a better phrase, it means successive generations of local government staffs must understand the WHY. Learn from these words of wisdom by G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) who said:



## One-Minute Takeaway



“Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery is much more than just about the physical infrastructure. It is more than just about setting some money aside for infrastructure replacement. It must be a comprehensive and integrated approach that links the past, present and future.”

Geoff Garbutt, City Manager, City of Courtenay

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### **Comox Valley was an early adopter when the region embraced the vision for *Sustainable Service Delivery* for infrastructure asset management**

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Everyone learns through stories, and this is how the Partnership hopes to inspire readers. With this edition, the Partnership announced release of the second in a series of comprehensive “stories behind the stories” of inter-regional collaboration among local governments along the east coast of Vancouver Island and in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia.

The second in the series features the four Comox Valley local governments. The Partnership describes the regional team approach in the Comox Valley as an “experiment in collaboration”.

### **Stream Systems and Watershed Stewardship in the Comox Valley: Moving Towards Sustainable Service Delivery**

The experiment in collaboration began in 2007 as a multi-year “convening for action” program co-funded by the Province and the Real Estate Foundation of BC, and guided by this mantra:

“EVERYONE NEEDS TO AGREE ON EXPECTATIONS AND HOW ALL THE PLAYERS WILL WORK TOGETHER, AND AFTER THAT EACH COMMUNITY CAN REACH ITS GOALS IN ITS OWN WAY.”



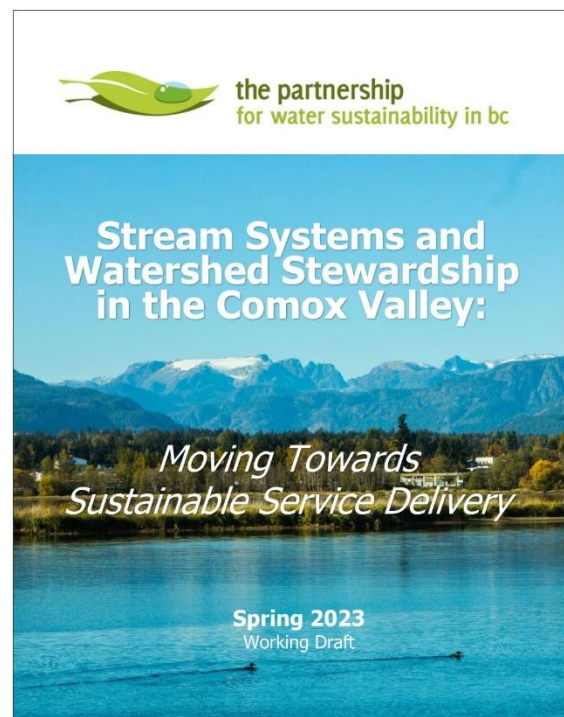
The Comox Valley was the first region to embrace the vision for Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery as a regional goal. This was in 2011, four years before the BC Framework was jointly released by UBCM and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs through Asset Management BC.

An over-arching takeaway from the Comox Valley story is that the collaboration journey must be measured in terms of decades rather than years. Collaboration has built trust in the Comox Valley. The four local governments are looking beyond their boundaries to figure out how they can help and support each other.

"We do not have to be exactly the same in what we do," they say, "but we need to be consistent in the message. Those past connections and that social contract with each other is part of what greases the wheel and gets stuff done."

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[https://waterbucket.ca/viw/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2023/05/IREI\\_Story-of-Comox-Valley\\_Apr-2023\\_final-draft.pdf](https://waterbucket.ca/viw/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2023/05/IREI_Story-of-Comox-Valley_Apr-2023_final-draft.pdf)



## STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

# Moving Towards Sustainable Service Delivery in the Comox Valley

The [Eco-Asset Symposium](#) in 2017 put the Comox Valley on the map. It attracted a capacity crowd of 160 delegates from as far as away as the East Kootenays and many were reluctantly turned away. The symposium was a collaboration of the Comox Valley Conservation Partnership and four local governments and included a public event.

The symposium was the first high-profile event on Vancouver Island, if not British Columbia, to draw attention to **Natural Asset Management** and the potentially powerful and cost-effective role that ecosystem services can play in an infrastructure strategy. In effect, it served as the springboard to so much that has subsequently unfolded.



Being an early adopter of the vision for Sustainable Service Delivery also put the Comox Valley on the map. “In 2011, the regional team was ahead of the curve when we turned our minds to the challenge of a regional response to infrastructure liability,” Derek Richmond informed the Comox Valley Regional Board in October 2017.

“When one reflects on how understanding of how the goal of [Assessment Management for Sustainable Service Delivery: A BC Framework](#) has evolved in BC, it is evident that the Comox Valley has played an important and significant role as a catalyst for action.”



Looking back, the arrival of David Allen in 2013 as Courtenay's Chief Administrative Officer created the momentum necessary to move from awareness to action. A champion of Sustainable Service Delivery, David Allen presented a vision of what could be, and subsequently left a legacy foundation for successive municipal councils to embrace this vision. In 2019, under David's watch, Courtenay adopted BC's first Asset Management Bylaw.



“A strong corporate culture creates the foundation for asset management that achieves the goals of Sustainable Service Delivery. For organization-wide implementation to be effective, however, it must be led by the CAO and supported by Councils and Boards.”

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## **PART ONE: What intergovernmental collaboration looks like in the Comox Valley**

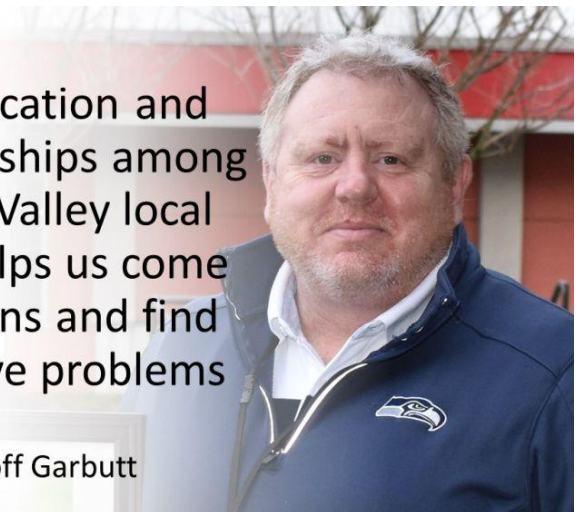
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“Layered over internal collaboration, there is a spirit of collaboration among the four Comox Valley local governments. And it starts at the top. Amongst the four CAOs, we share a strong desire to work together. Carrying on and fostering that culture of collaboration is something that I think is critical for all of us to move forward,” states Geoff Garbutt.

*A resident of the Comox Valley since 2000, Geoff Garbutt joined the City of Courtenay as a planner shortly after. This experience was followed by long-term stints with the Regional District of Nanaimo and the Comox Valley Regional District. He rejoined the City of Courtenay as City Manager in early 2021, succeeding David Allen.*

“Open communication and building relationships among the four Comox Valley local governments helps us come to better decisions and find pathways to solve problems collectively.”

Geoff Garbutt





## Lines of communication are open

"With four local governments in the Comox Valley, how do we stay on the same path? Our shared vision developed through the Regional Growth Strategy has us working together, with shared principles, and are rowing in the same direction. With this backbone, collaboration can then be really powerful. A lot of that rowing in the same direction is going to be supported by our focus on the natural environment, environmental management, climate adaptation."

"The four CAOs have diverse backgrounds which include individual and group strengths in financial management, economic development, governance, services and planning. We are working closely together, and those lines of communication are open. We are looking for shared service models."

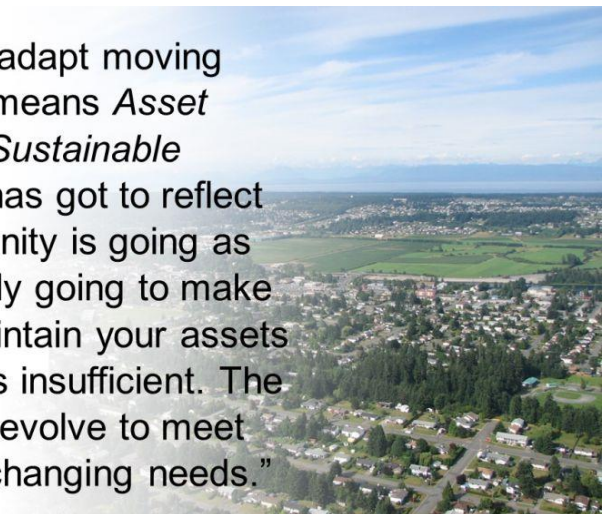
"We are looking at opportunities to develop a level of consistency to manage a variety of issues. And we are looking to tackle them in a common way. One of the goals from our OCP is to incorporate similar rules from the different jurisdictions. The objective is to be consistent while also helping our development community."

## Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery

"In my mind, the phrase Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery is a euphemism for *make the right decisions, think about the future, and then take action*. It is much more than just the physical infrastructure. It is more than just setting some money aside for infrastructure replacement."

"It must be comprehensive and integrated in linking the past, present and future. And furthermore, Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery has got to evolve because the future is NOT the past."

"We also need to adapt moving forward. So, that means *Asset Management for Sustainable Service Delivery* has got to reflect where the community is going as well. If you are only going to make decisions that maintain your assets as they are, that is insufficient. The process needs to evolve to meet the community's changing needs."



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## PART TWO: A local government's water stewardship journey meanders like a creek

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"I am a project person. I come from a project background and am used to the stages of a project – from conception through budgeting, procurement, construction, and commissioning. It is a very structured spectrum of activities. There is a defined beginning and end," states Marc Rutten.

"But that is not the way it is in the world of water stewardship. It is a bit like a creek. It just meanders all over the place such that you just cannot seem to get things to completion even when the process is a good one. You learn that this is what it means to be on a journey."

"A journey takes time. That is a big learning, just understanding that it is not a project with a defined beginning and end. It is a journey, and like a creek, it can go in so many different directions."

*Marc joined the Comox Valley Regional District in 2009 and is the General Manager of Engineering Services.*

"Other local governments within the IREI network collaborate with us and provide peer support. Those relationships are enduring, both within and beyond the Comox Valley. The whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts."

Marc Rutten  
CVRD General Manager of Engineering



### Benefits of inter-regional collaboration

"We no longer meet every month like we used to back in 2009. In years past, CAVI meetings were scheduled in our calendars because sharing sessions with other Comox Valley local governments were ongoing. However, everything we learned is enduring."

"For example, right now CVRD is doing a watershed stewardship study across the entire regional district to determine whether a watershed stewardship service similar to what is in place for the Nanaimo and Cowichan is something that the Comox Valley community will support."

“Without the knowledge of what has been done in both the Regional District of Nanaimo and Cowichan Valley Regional District, and the contacts that we have made through the IREI, we might have gone a different way or reinvented the wheel. But we do have these models and these contacts as a result of inter-regional collaboration.”

“In my opinion, we have really benefited from the restructuring of the regional district. It is geographically tight and that has helped us. Being physically close together has helped us come together.”

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### **PART THREE: Working towards the Sustainable Service Delivery goal in the Town of Comox**

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“Administrators must remember that Council is not making technical decisions. Our job is to help them understand strategic options and impacts. Adding decimal places does not help that understanding at all. Decimals are not needed for strategic decisions,” states Jordan Wall, Town of Comox Chief Administrative Officer since 2020.

“Our Council will have tough decisions to make. And we are going to have to do our best to help them understand that. Being part of the IREI network makes it that much easier to reach out to other local governments to tap into the experience and wisdom of peers who are also on the sustainable service delivery journey.”

“District of Oak Bay experience, for example, gave us perspective about a process that results in everyone pointing in the right direction strategically.”



“We are proud that the Town of Comox embraced the idea of *sustainable service delivery* and ecological accounting practices well before they became an accepted part of the local government vocabulary.”

Jordan Wall, CAO, Town of Comox



## Collaboration and knowing who to contact

“Oak Bay is demonstrating what a difference it makes when municipal staff have clear direction from Council to achieve two outcomes. So, we reached out to Christopher Paine, Oak Bay’s Director of Financial Services, to see what we could learn from Oak Bay experience.”

“Oak Bay’s first objective is to stem the incremental erosion of levels of service in the short-term. Their second objective is to translate an intergenerational perspective into a life-cycle plan of action for perpetual infrastructure renewal.”

“An appealing aspect of what Oak Bay is doing, and Comox can do it too, is to put money in the bank. The advantage of that strategy is that a local government can use the interest earned to pay for the inflationary costs of infrastructure replacement.”

“THE FUNDING STRATEGY IS A PROCESS AND WE ARE PRETTY EXCITED ABOUT IT. COMOX IS AT A DEFINING MOMENT. FROM MY CAREER PERSPECTIVE, I BELIEVE IT WILL PROVE TO BE THE MOST IMPACTFUL DECISIONS AND PROJECT THAT I WILL EVER HELP A COUNCIL COME TO TERMS WITH.”

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## PART FOUR: **Perseverance Watershed Initiative in Cumberland is a replicable precedent**

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Michelle Mason has lived in Cumberland for close to 30 years. She joined the Village in 2009 as Deputy Financial Officer and progressed to Chief Administrative Officer.

“Even though Cumberland is a very different community from what it once was, the one common thread over time is how the community wants to be part of the solution. When people are engaged, they are interested in the oral history of the place,” observes Michelle Mason.

“How people in the community are engaged is the education piece. The more they engage, the more they can be part of the solution because they understand the restrictions that we operate under as local government. It becomes quite a collaborative upbringing you could say.”



"We have had to manage this fast-growing community with limited abilities to raise funds in the short term still because our tax base is quite small. It is really important as a smaller municipality to partner with other Comox Valley local governments and with local community groups."

Michelle Mason, CAO, Village of Cumberland

### **More can be accomplished through a partnership**

"The Perseverance Watershed Initiative is a unique partnership between the Village, Cumberland Forest Society and Mosaic Forest Management. It is focused on integrated watershed planning and management in support of long-term sustainability and resilience of the Perseverance Creek watershed. We have also invited K'ómoks First Nation to the table as well because that relationship is super important."

"We are just in the beginning phases of the initiative. Collaboration on watershed protection is so important because only 25% of the watershed is protected. The other 75% is managed by private timber."

"PWI has a bigger picture because many other eastern Vancouver Island communities are in a similar situation. And that is, their water source is in a watershed where the land is largely owned by a private forestry company. Hopefully some of the work that we are doing with PWI can inform others."

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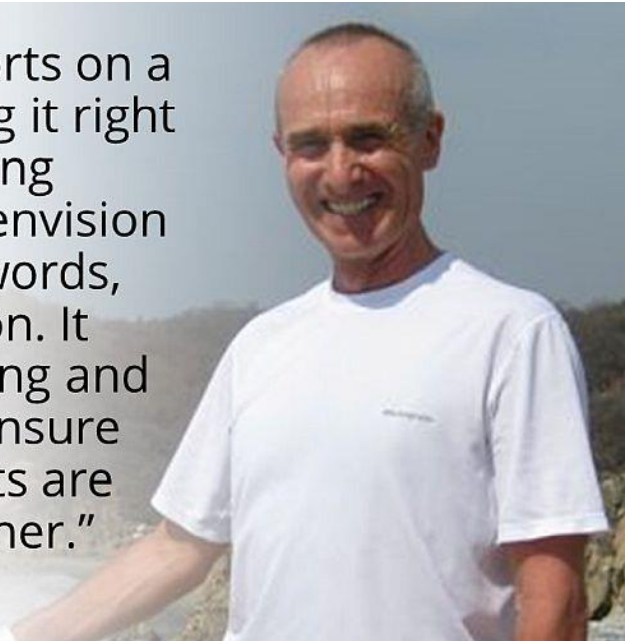
### **In conclusion, the 4Cs are the mantra for a Regional Team Approach: Communication, Cooperation, Collaboration, Coordination**

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**4Cs are the mantra for a Regional Team Approach:  
*Communication, Cooperation, Collaboration,  
Coordination***

“If you are going to align efforts on a watershed scale, then getting it right at the front-end means looking beyond your boundaries to envision the bigger picture. In other words, global thinking for local action. It means you are communicating and cooperating with others to ensure that your collaborative results are coordinated in a timely manner.”

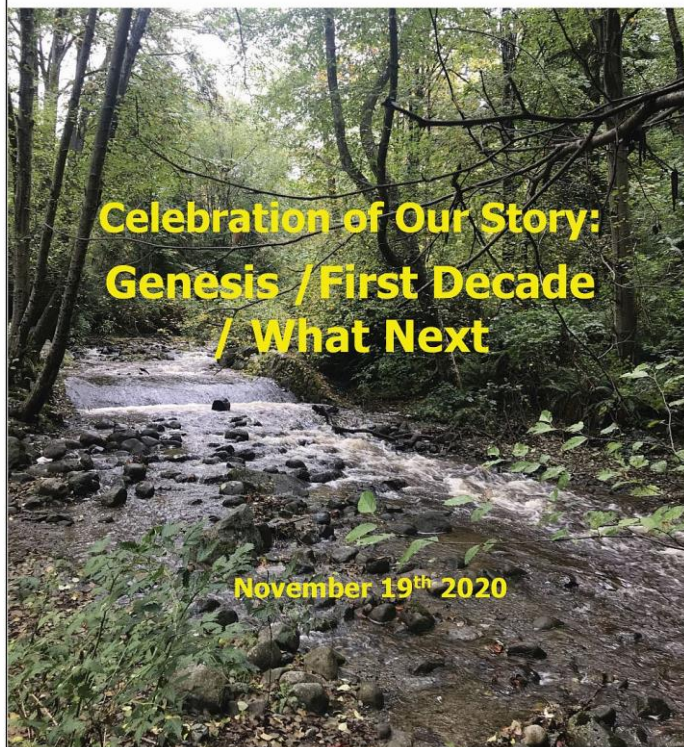
Derek Richmond







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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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