Living Water Smart in British Columbia:

Collaboration - steppingstone to a culture of appreciation

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 March 12, 2024 features a conversational interview with Pete Steblin, former City Manager with the City of Coquitlam in the Metro Vancouver region. In the interview, he reflected on his experience in building trust through collaborating to create a culture and cycle of appreciation in the city.

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 City of Coquitlam

[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

One-Minute Takeaway

"With the advantage of hindsight and time, we now have an appreciation of the extent to which conflict defined Coquitlam's green infrastructure journey."

"**Balance. Alignment. Appreciation.** Three words that capture so much. They are foundation pieces for creating a *culture of collaboration* which is a steppingstone to a *culture of appreciation.*"

Pete Steblin, retired City Manager

Balance is key to good government

"At the end of the day, good decision-making comes down to a good process. But it also relies on wisdom in terms of balanced advice. The essence of my guiding philosophy as a City Manager is distilled into **the three Ts** which are <u>trust, time and think</u>," states Pete Steblin.

Trust: "When there is a significant level of trust in technical recommendations, Councils rarely override them. Staff explains recommendations. The Council makes the decisions. Trust is fragile and can easily be broken. When trust is lost, decades of good work can be lost."

Time: "If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority! We took the *'reality of time'* into consideration when we set workload priorities in Coquitlam. We ranked them as A, B or C because this allowed us to manage timelines effectively. It helped Council focus on what is most important to make progress over time."

Think: "We are not perfect. We struggle with challenges related to blindly following standards of practice. Too often, that can lead to unsuitable or unsustainable solutions. So, I encouraged staff to think about compromises and maximizing the benefit for the money spent."

Peter Steblin is an engineer who progressed to City Manager. His local government career began with the City of Vancouver and concluded at the City of Coquitlam in 2023.

When he joined Coquitlam in January 2008, controversy surrounded the way the city had mandated use of green infrastructure in new development. One of his first priorities was to stickhandle a path forward to a balanced solution.

"Staff gives good advice and Council makes the decision - the operative phrase is a respect-based relationship"

Collaboration - steppingstone to a culture of appreciation

With adoption by the Regional Board and ministerial approval of the Metro Vancouver region's first Liquid Waste Management Plan in 2002, local governments formally embraced the concept of **watershed-based community planning**. Other than Surrey, however, none had yet developed a solid mechanism for rolling out watershed-based approaches and processes.

In Coquitlam, 2003 was a defining year. The Council amended the city's Official Community Plan.[4] The new policies required that **Watershed Plans** be developed first and **Neighbourhood Plans** second; and that land use plans account for watershed conditions and needs. This is the backdrop for the story behind the story that follows.

In 2003, the City of Coquitlam was clearly visionary when it first embraced and then formalized a watershed-based approach as a foundation piece in the Official Community Plan. By the latter part of the decade, however, Coquitlam was viewed by others in the region as the example of what not do. This is the backdrop for the story behind the story that follows.

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[4] https://waterbucket.ca/cfa/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/02/2003-Coquitlam-OCP-amendments.pdf

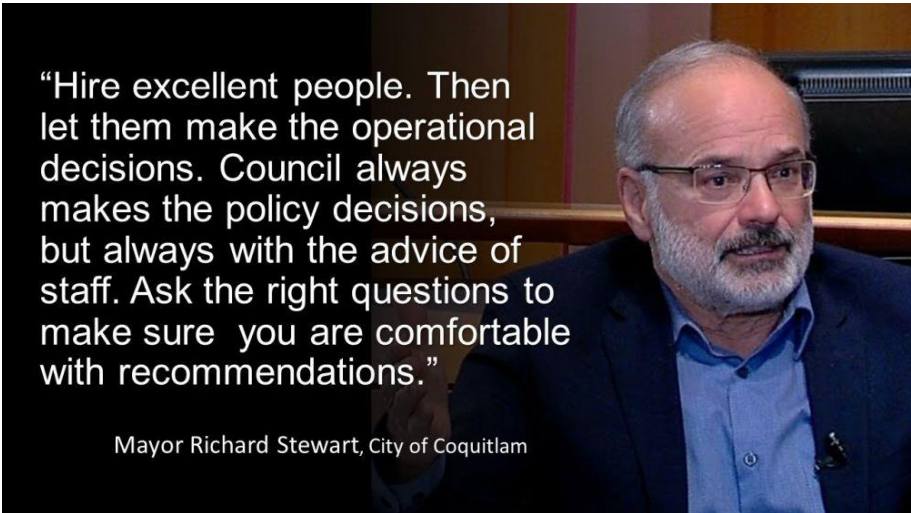# Coquitlam is the model for keeping things simple, practical, and implementable

"At the time, the City's approach to watershed-based community planning, rainwater management and green infrastructure was quite idealistic. It was also prescriptive and impractical. As a result, the city could not implement what was proposed. That is the crisis situation that I inherited at the end of 2007," recalls Pete Steblin.

Through a trust-building process guided by Pete Steblin, the City of Coquitlam turned a crisis into a transformational outcome. The city emerged as a regional green infrastructure leader. "The final solution has to be doable; it has to be achievable," emphasizes Pete Steblin.

If the City of Surrey is the gold standard for a watershed-based approach to rainwater management and green infrastructure, then the City of Coquitlam is the silver standard. A noteworthy aspect of the Coquitlam story is how quickly municipal staff learned from experience, adapted their approach, and successfully instilled a new way of doing business.

"In the end, it comes down to the acceptance by council members that staff are the experts. We should not be looking to substitute our wisdom for theirs."

Mayor Richard Stewart

"Hire excellent people. Then let them make the operational decisions. Council always makes the policy decisions, but always with the advice of staff. Ask the right questions to make sure you are comfortable with recommendations."

Mayor Richard Stewart, City of Coquitlam

Collaborate and create a culture of appreciation
*- extracts from a conversation with Peter Steblin*

Keep things simple, practical, and implementable

"Coquitlam has arrived at a good place, but the journey was not easy. In fact, we had to work our way through some pretty contentious periods, notably from mid-2007 through early 2009. We persevered, we adapted, and we progressed," reflects Peter Steblin.

"In 2004, Coquitlam had adopted a prescriptive manual for low impact development. The manual was too theoretical and unbuildable. This resulted in significant complaints from the development community which, in turn, culminated in Council-Staff conflict."

This "story behind the story" weaves quotable quotes by Pete Steblin into a succinct storyline. This preview about his experience in leading and managing change is extracted from an interview included in a legacy resource that the Partnership will release later in 2024.

"When I joined the city at the beginning of 2008, that was the giant hornet nest that I had to resolve if we were to rebuild trust and move forward."
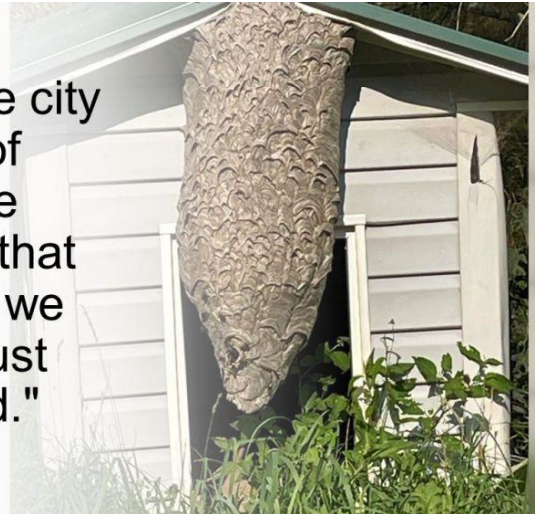
"With the advantage of hindsight and time, we now have an appreciation of the extent to which this conflict defined the (green infrastructure) journey. There was a dark period yet that is what makes the Coquitlam story authentic and helped us to develop approaches which balance idealism with pragmatism."

"We want other local governments to know about the good, the bad and the ugly of the Coquitlam story so that they may learn from our experience and know that it is okay to stumble."

Balance idealism with pragmatism to achieve beneficial outcomes for the community

"When I became City Manager, the City's approach to watershed-based community planning, rainwater management and green infrastructure was quite idealistic. As a result, the city could not implement what was proposed. That is why we had to do a re-think. That is when we came up with the monicker **net environmental benefit**."

"I believe that you should not follow rigid standards. If people rely too much on standards, they park their brain at the door. Its much better to think about the principles behind the standards and use judgement in implementing them. That results in much better solutions."
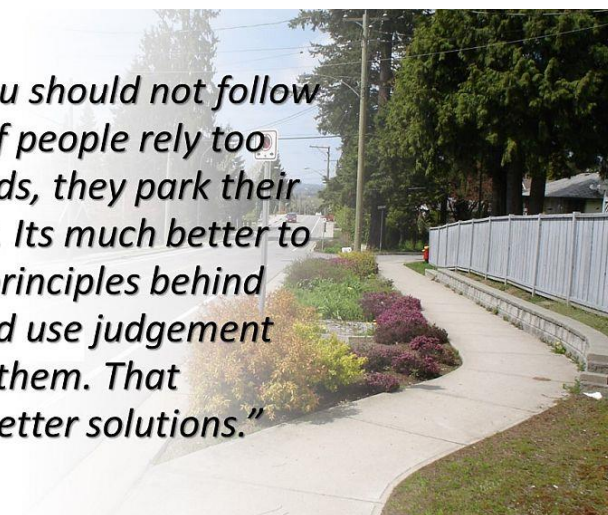
"So, what we did in 2008 and 2009 was to re-think things and say something is better than nothing. So much depends on what your political support is, where society is at, and what are the trade-offs. When we made those changes to on-site rainwater management requirements, they were good changes, and they were well received."

Net environmental benefit is a concept that works

"In 2009, the Council endorsed a 'systems approach' philosophy which aims to offset impacts in one area of a watershed with gains in another area for a 'net environmental benefit'. Figure out what is the best thing for society to do and where you would get the most bang for the buck."

"On-site rainwater management was not an issue after we made those changes in 2009. The process was working. The solution was there. When things are working, and you are the City Manager and it does not come across your desk, then it is not an issue."

"At the end of the day, good decision-making comes down to a good process. But it also relies on wisdom in terms of balanced advice. And it comes with an accountable, political group of elected representatives that make the decisions."

Good ideas and an appreciative community

"After the 2022 election, I described Council as a beacon of stability. Of the nine, seven councillors were re-elected and two retired. The two new council members both had positive things to say about the community and the direction the City is going in. The voters want that."

"The way I describe it is as a continuum. It starts with an appreciative community, and I really appreciate the appreciative community that Coquitlam is. When we do things for the community, they are more apt to say thank you, or it is about time this happened. This is in contrast with, where did that come from."

Reflections on creating a culture of appreciation in the City of Coquitlam

"Over my career, I have worked in four cities, and observed many cities across the country. There are angry communities and there are appreciative communities, and I have worked in both."

"This experience provides me with context for concluding that something really good is going on in Coquitlam. It is an appreciative community and generally elects collaborative individuals to Council because the community is looking for positive things to do."
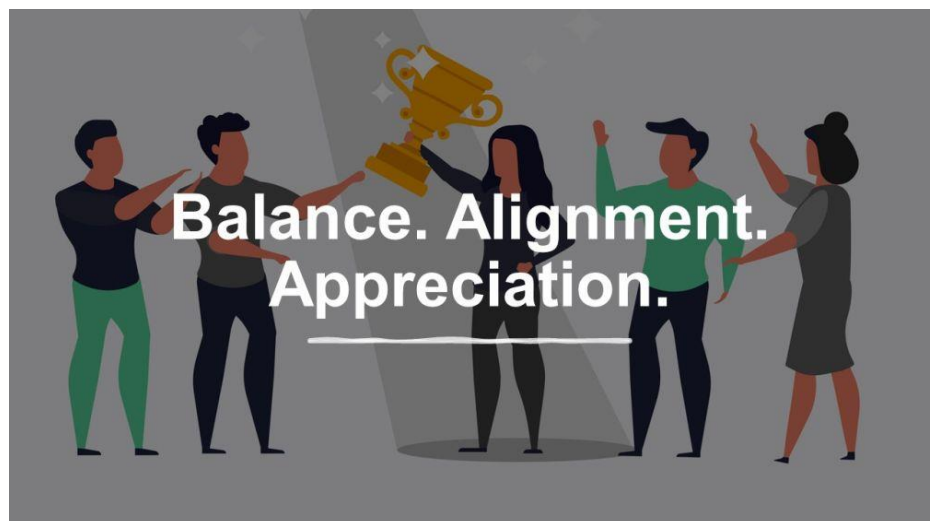
"Balance. Alignment. Appreciation. Three words that capture so much. They are foundation pieces for creating a culture of collaboration which is a steppingstone to a culture of appreciation."
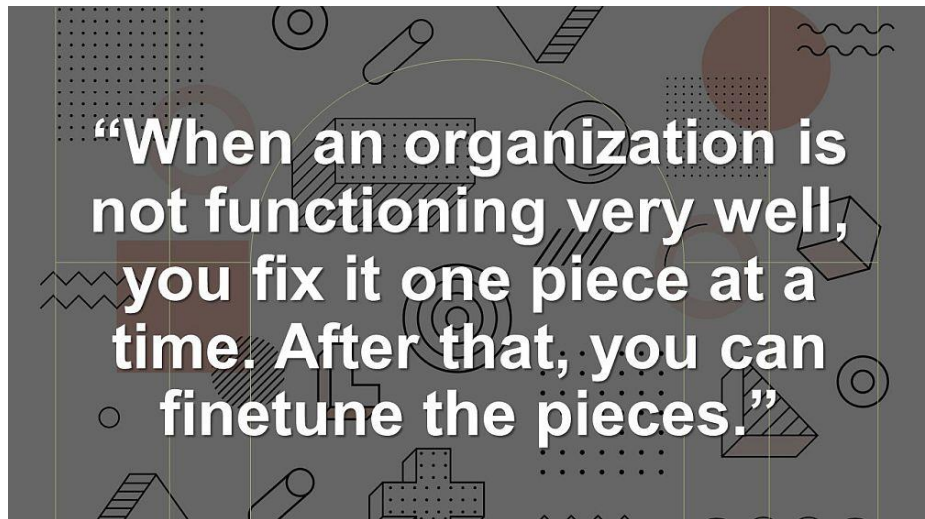
"This applies to the relationship between the political and administrative wings. It also applies to the organization as a whole."

"When an organization is not functioning very well, you fix it one piece at a time. After that, you can finetune the pieces."

"An airplane analogy is one way to describe the relationship. Think of one wing as political and the other as administration. If either wing is not functioning properly, the plane will crash."

Cycle of continuous improvement and giving back:

"It takes a decade to create a good culture in an organization. But you can destroy it in a year with the wrong political leadership. To keep it going, you must continue to do good things."

"It takes good ideas. But it also takes a Council that is supportive of the good ideas. And it takes money to follow through and implement those ideas."
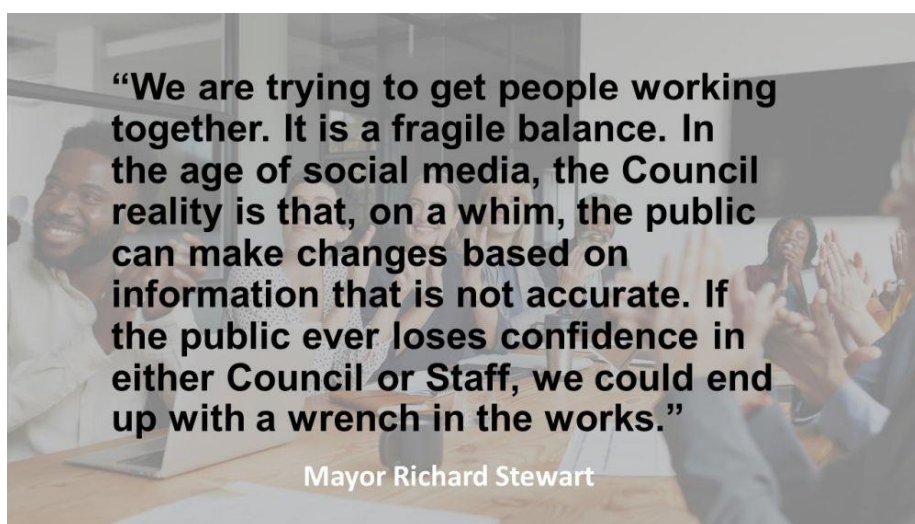
"Instill a culture of continuous improvement and giving back to the community so that the community elects good, well-meaning people. It is a cycle."

"The community elects good people to council. And councillors rely on staff to come up with ideas. The council supports those ideas and is willing to fund them. Staff carries them out. The community notices those ideas being implemented, and they are happy. It is a cycle! "

"The community becomes even more appreciative. If you keep that cycle going, there is no end to it. The cycle actually does work!" concludes Pete Steblin.
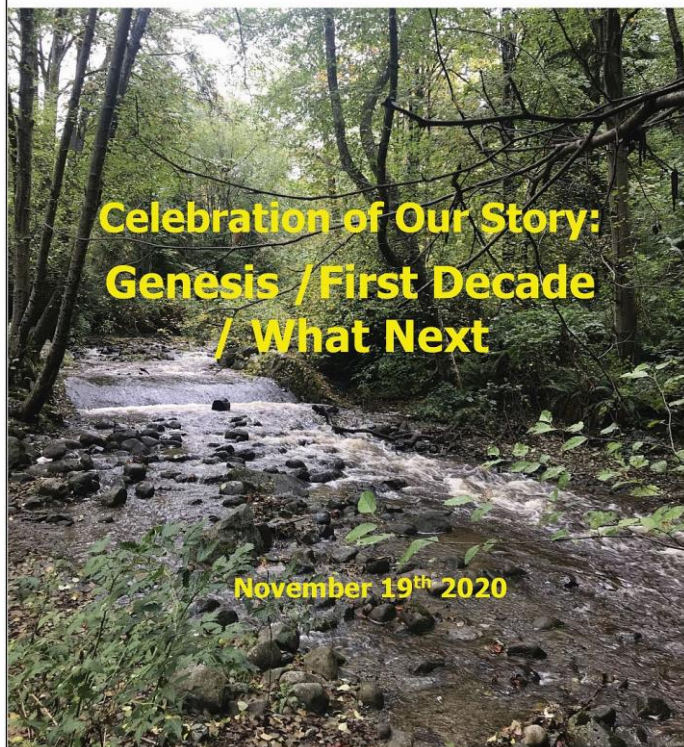
"Getting Council to a consensus is the goal. We are the only council in the Lower Mainland, I believe, that is operating at around 98% approval of staff recommendations."

Mayor Richard Stewart

"We are trying to get people working together. It is a fragile balance. In the age of social media, the Council reality is that, on a whim, the public can make changes based on information that is not accurate. If the public ever loses confidence in either Council or Staff, we could end up with a wrench in the works."

Mayor Richard Stewart

Celebration of Our Story:
Genesis /First Decade / What Next

November 19th 2020

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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.