



the partnership  
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on April 30, 2024  
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

# **Living Water Smart in British Columbia:**

## **Georgia Basin Initiative legacy ripples thru time**

## 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 April 30, 2024 features Joan Sawicki and her “story behind the story” of the genesis and early years of the Georgia Basin Initiative in the 1990s. The edition is dedicated to Darlene Marzari, former BC Ministry of Municipal Affairs, and champion of community and regional planning. Darlene Marzari was the single most important reason for the success of the Georgia Basin Initiative, says Joan Sawicki.

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>

## One-Minute Takeaway

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*“If we have lost anything in the last 30 years, it is a strong provincial commitment to supporting community and regional planning. We need another Darlene Marzari,” states Joan Sawicki*

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*Joan Sawicki and Darlene Marzari at the announcement for the Urban Salmon Habitat Program at Deer Lake in Burnaby, 1995*

The Georgia Basin links two nations and includes the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Strait of Georgia, Puget Sound, the adjacent lowlands of Vancouver Island, the lower mainland and the slopes of the mountain ranges surrounding and draining into this area.

The three bodies of water are collectively known as the Salish Sea.

This bioregion is one of the most ecologically diverse areas of North America, containing a wide range of vegetation and fish and wildlife habitats of international significance. It is also one of the most threatened.

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### Georgia Basin Initiative: Creating a Sustainable Future

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Launched in 1994, the Georgia Basin Initiative was a call to action by the provincial government led by Premier Mike Harcourt. The influence of the Georgia Basin Initiative has rippled through time in profound and lasting ways. In 2024, we celebrate the 30th anniversary of a watershed moment in BC history.

The living legacy of the Georgia Basin Initiative is embedded in and embodied by the [Georgia Basin Inter-Regional Educational Initiative](#)<sup>4</sup>. Led by the Partnership for Water Sustainability and supported by five regional districts, the IREI is now in **Year 13** and provides peer-based education among local governments.

The idea for the Georgia Basin Initiative was spawned in a report by *BC Round Table on the Environment and the Economy*, chaired by Mayor Joy Leach. Published in late 1993, the Round Table report was titled **Georgia Basin Initiative: Creating a Sustainable Future**.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://waterbucket.ca/viw/category/inter-regional-education-initiative/>



“The great inland sea of the Georgia Basin – not unlike a great lake – is our common link... this region is a bioregion upon which we all base our environmental, economic and social futures.”

- page 6 of *Creating a Sustainable Future*

*Opening Remarks by Mayor Joy Leach, Georgia Basin Initiative workshop, Nanaimo, BC*

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## When the stars align, anything is possible

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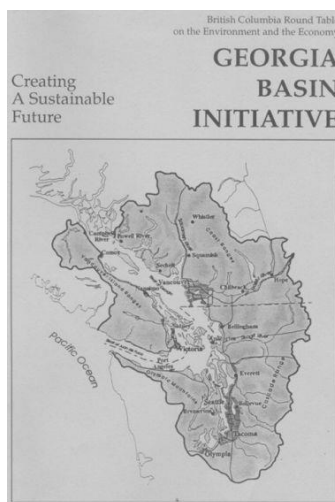
“The 1990s was a very heady time in government in terms of land use planning and natural resource management. Some initiatives were not implemented all that well, **but the Georgia Basin Initiative was the exception,**” recalls Joan Sawicki. She was the Parliamentary Secretary for the Georgia Basin Initiative during the period 1994-1996.

“It did exactly what it was intended to do. Moreover, even though it only existed as an entity for a couple of years, it spawned a whole number of other initiatives and programs, some of which blossomed and still exist today.”

### A legacy of "convening for action" in the Georgia Basin

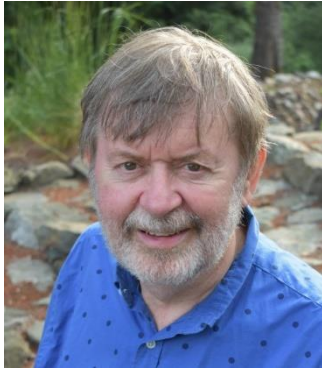
Within a few years, the Georgia Basin Initiative led to a federal-provincial agreement to collaborate under the umbrella of the **Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative**. The first 5-year plan covered the years 1998 through 2003.

The **Georgia Basin Action Plan**, an evolution of the GBEI, then covered the second 5-year period from 2003 through 2008. The current IREI follows in the footsteps of the GBEI and GBAP. Three decades and counting is an amazing legacy.



“That report may not have gone anywhere. After all, libraries are full of aspirational reports like that. But, in this instance, all the stars seemed to come into alignment.”

## Editor's Perspective by Kim A Stephens



For the past 16 months, I have been drawing on my lived experience to compile a legacy resource which is a chronicle of the green infrastructure journey in the Metro Vancouver region. **Who did what, why, and how.**

The chronicle covers the period 1997 through 2023 and will be released later in 2024. The chronicle tells the story through quotable quotes.

The story begins with the Georgia Basin Initiative. Without the vision and leadership of Darlene Marzari as Minister of Municipal Affairs, the Georgia Basin Initiative could not and would not have happened. That is the story behind the story.

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### Understand and learn from the past to chart a course forward in tumultuous times

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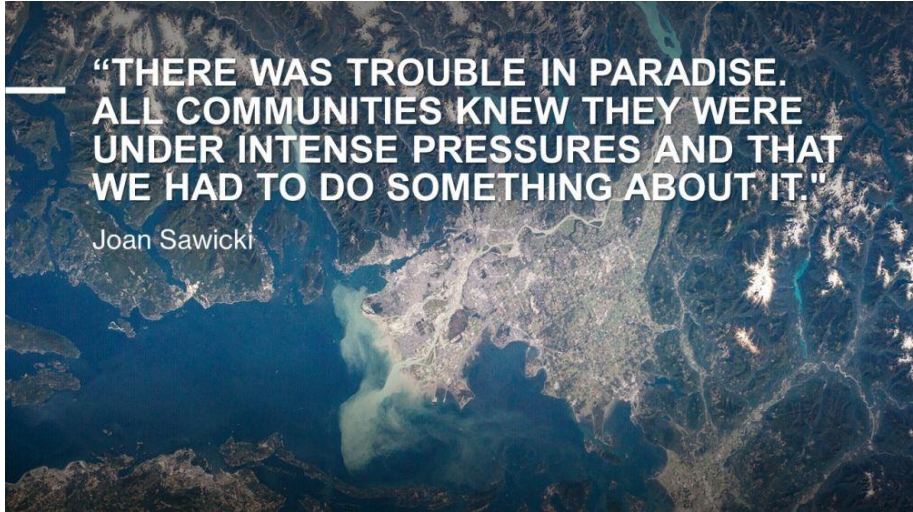
The chronicle is structured in increments of time, for example, 2018 through 2023. These increments are bracketed by watershed moments. The period 1997 through 2005 was a transformational era in BC history. The seeds were planted in the first half of the 1990s with the Georgia Basin Initiative.

An understanding of lessons learned in the 1990s could and should inform a path forward in 2024. To that end, I have supplemented my lived experience by conducting interviews with key players from that era of bold thinking and innovation.

Joan Sawicki, former elected representative at the local and provincial scales, was one such agent of change. In this edition of Waterbucket eNews, Joan Sawicki brings an exciting era to life with reflections that are fascinating, illuminating and prompt this question:

**Will another Darlene Marzari emerge as Minister of Municipal Affairs and be the provincial champion for community and regional planning?**

Being an effective champion requires deep knowledge, experience and quiet resolve to make things happen, says Joan Sawicki.



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## **Because there was trouble in paradise...**

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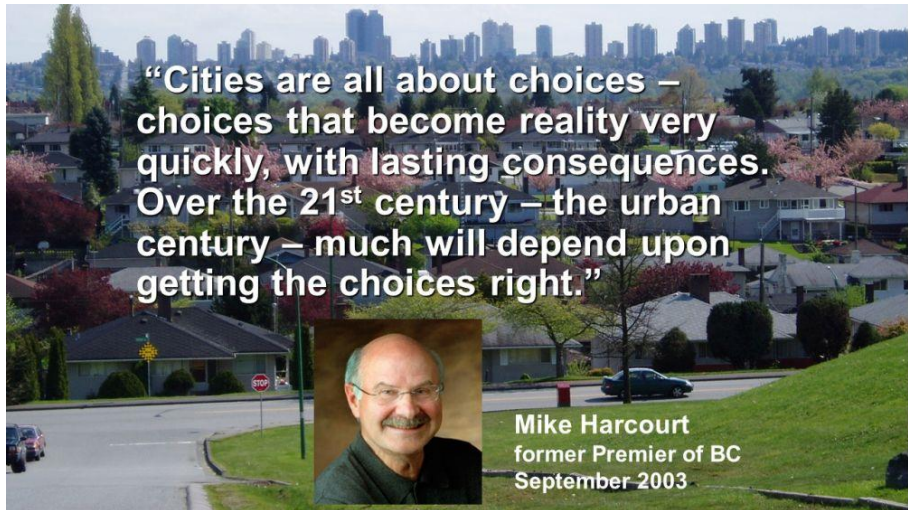
*“I was also already a keen student of **‘Our Common Future’**. As a naïve new Councillor, I actually bought 5 copies of the book and plunked them on the desks of all our Directors in Burnaby, including Finance and Engineering.”*

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“With the change of government in late 1991, all of a sudden land use planning and natural resource management was front and centre,” states Joan Sawicki.

“We had Mike Harcourt as Premier and Darlene Marzari as Minister of Municipal Affairs. Both had come out of local government. They were very familiar with the urgent growth pressures and the ecological impacts that they were having.”

“Then I was appointed Marzari’s Parliamentary Secretary and really wanted something substantive to do. I, too, had spent a term as an elected Councillor in Burnaby. So, the Georgia Basin Initiative was a good fit for me.”



## STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

### Georgia Basin Initiative legacy ripples thru time - extracts from a conversation with Joan Sawicki

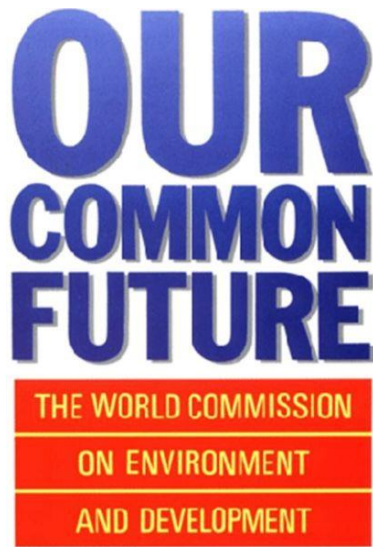
"It is important to understand the political environment at the time," stresses Joan Sawicki.

"The 1980s was a pretty stagnant period in terms of positive government initiatives related to land use and natural resource management. But there were rumblings of discontent; it manifested itself most directly with growing concern over the logging of old growth forests."

### The Brundtland Commission introduced a new idea called 'sustainable development'

"Another impetus that started shifting thinking was the Brundtland Commission report, Our Common Future, which came out in 1987. There is this one sentence on page 9 that I was focused on then and I still believe it today."

*"The Brundtland Commission introduced this alternate world of so-called 'sustainable development'. And it talked about protecting 12% of the land base. Think about that! Now people are talking 30 and even 50 percent but at that time 12% was a real shocker!"*



***"The real world of interlocked economic and ecological systems will not change. The policies and institutions concerned must."***

"The Georgia Basin Initiative was a deliberate attempt to do that. Change policies and institutions."

“The region’s continued health and sustainability demands that we treat it as one system, not as a composite of separate and jurisdictionally distinct entities.”

from page 14,  
*Georgia Basin Initiative: Creating a Sustainable Future, 1993*



“There was a key point that really resonated with me and that was this idea that...structurally, we set up our governments in vertical silos - like Forests, Health, Environment, Economic Development - but ecosystems exist horizontally as integrated systems.”

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## With the change of government in 1991, land use planning was front and centre

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“The Round Table movement was also just emerging. It was this big tent idea of saying; Let’s get all stakeholders in a room together and talk things out.”

“Upon election in late 1991, Premier Mike Harcourt gave the recently appointed BC Round Table on the Environment and the Economy a new mandate. In late 1993, they submitted *Georgia Basin Initiative: Creating a Sustainable Future*.”

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*“With a strong Minister of Municipal Affairs, Darlene Marzari, the ‘settlement side’ of land use planning went straight into regional planning and the Growth Strategies Act.”*

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“Things still may not have moved forward if Darlene Marzari had not assigned Erik Karlsen to work with me.”

Joan Sawicki, 2024

Erik Karlsen (1945-2020)

former Director of Regional Growth Strategies  
Ministry of Municipal Affairs





"A long-time planner with the ministry, Erik Karlsen was a key ingredient. He not only had the passion and understanding for this stuff and was way ahead of his time, but he also had an unparalleled network of connection with Georgia Basin communities – and, most importantly, a high degree of trust with those communities."

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## When top-down meets bottom-up...

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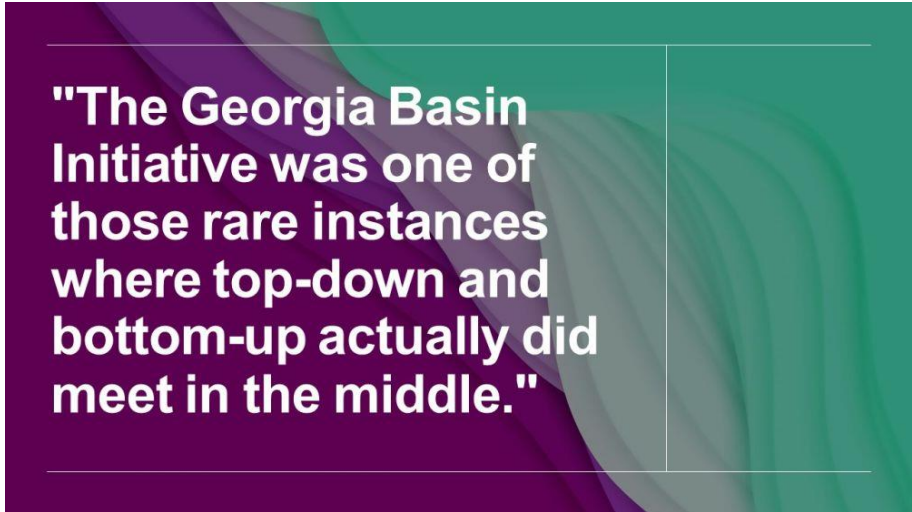
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*"That is just the reality of human nature. That includes the gap that often exists between what the public say they want in the long-term and what they demand or will accept in the short-term."*

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"People who are not familiar with the culture – and complexity - of governing are often frustrated as to why governments cannot or do not achieve what they say they are going to achieve."

"In my experience, governments tend to work in one of two modes. It is either crisis management, when something happens and government has to 'do something'...or at least be seen to be doing something. Or, at the other end, governments produce lofty, visionary reports and announcements that, while suitably aspirational, too often sit on the shelf unable to be implemented."



**"The Georgia Basin Initiative was one of those rare instances where top-down and bottom-up actually did meet in the middle."**

"As Parliamentary Secretary, I had a visionary document and strong personal support from Minister Marzari at the top. And I had Erik Karlsen's on-the-ground connections with Basin communities and their issues. All I had to do was run with it. And that's what we did! "

"The Georgia Basin Initiative was successful because we had the right people at the right time doing the right thing. How rare is that in government?"

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## So, what did the Georgia Basin Initiative actually do?

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“There was a clear understanding and consensus on the challenges – that the Georgia Basin was one of the most ecologically diverse regions and also one of the most threatened. There was trouble in paradise. All communities knew they were under intense pressures and that we had to do something about it.”



### The mandate was work with everybody

“But, we also had been given a clear vision along with sustainability principles. Much of that came from the Round Table’s work. It also fed into and from Darlene’s Growth Strategies Act for regional planning.”

“Erik and I were told that the intent of the Georgia Basin Initiative was to be both proactive and reactive. That was our job. Just get out there. Talk to all the stakeholders. Find out what was needed. Work with everybody, including cross-border because it was bioregional thinking.”

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*“Darlene Marzari was a very astute minister; she sent us out there but she did not just cut us loose. She demanded clear work plans. And accountability, with regular report backs, etc. So, the Georgia Basin Initiative was an entity that had it all from top to bottom.”*

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“Darlene Marzari had no difficulty pushing me into the limelight, letting me go throughout the region, and deliver her message. That was who she was. She knew exactly what she wanted us to achieve.”

## Because conversations lead to dialogue which in turn will lead to consensus

"Most of my work was just going out to Basin communities. Talking and listening to everybody and everything. Raising public awareness. Erik set that all up. He had his fingers in almost every pie."

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*"We tried not to come empty-handed. We had a small grants program. Erik Karlsen pinpointed the best projects that the Province could support."*

*"When communities told us they needed some planning tools, we worked on that."*

*"We put out newsletters so that people in the Region could learn from each other...and some of those programs could grow."*

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"I often felt like a travelling preacher spreading the gospel of bioregional thinking throughout the Region. When I look back at the number of workshops, conferences, and meetings we attended...no wonder we were exhausted! It was a very fast-paced couple of years."



**"We looked for every opportunity for the Province to support communities wanting to do good work. Those were two very heady years. When I think back on my political career, they were unique and phenomenal."**

## And so, the GBI spawned a movement

"The Georgia Basin Initiative did not survive the 1996 election as a stand-alone entity. There were lots of reasons for this. We had a new premier with a new mandate. Darlene did not run again and, after re-election, I was given a new assignment. But the thinking behind the GBI continued. The seeds had been sown. And they flourished."

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*"When you think of other initiatives, like Urban Salmon Habitat Program in 1995; the Fish Protection Act in 1997; riparian protection regulations, The Stewardship Series; Salmon in the City; Fraser Basin Council, Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative."*

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**"All of these initiatives were developed by people who took that bioregional thinking and what it gave them... AND JUST WENT FOR IT!!"**

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*“When you peel back the skin of the Fish Protection Act, the Urban Salmon Habitat Program not only raised awareness, it reflected what people in communities were saying. Sometimes things just come together. And when they do, WOW! Those times are not very common.”*

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## **The single most important reason for the success of the Georgia Basin Initiative**

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“The Fish Protection Act itself did not fall out of the sky. It too had a story. The Georgia Basin Initiative and the Round Table work were part of the story that allowed the Fish Protection Act to come into being - because people had come to understand the critical role of fish habitat and healthy streams as indicators of local and regional sustainability.”

“If I were to identify the single most important reason for the success of the Georgia Basin Initiative, I would say it was Darlene Marzari. If we have lost anything in the last 30 years, it is a strong provincial commitment to community and regional planning.”



“Darlene Marzari had the knowledge, experience and quiet resolve to make things happen.”

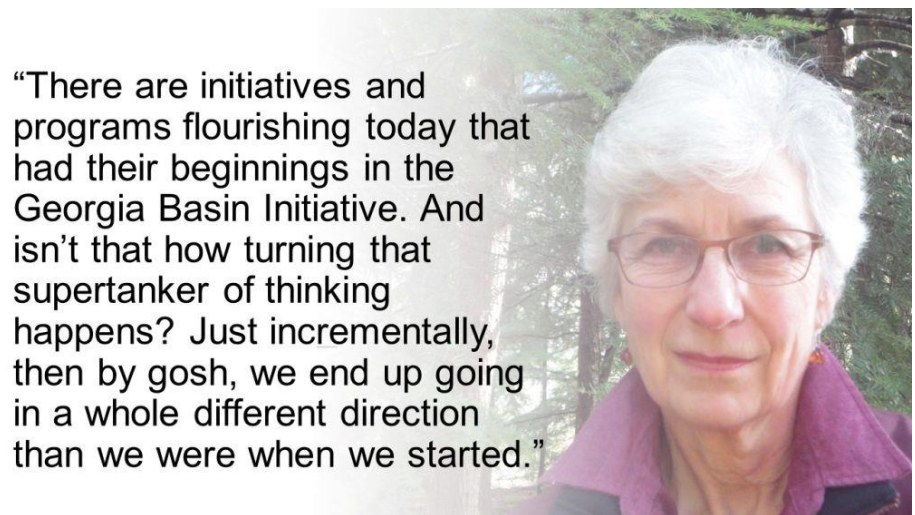
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*“When you think of the issues we face today.... weather extremes, drying rivers, degraded streams, frequent wildfires, population growth, housing affordability... they are no different than they were 30 years ago. They are just more complex and more urgent.”*

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## **Will another Darlene Marzari emerge, and when?**

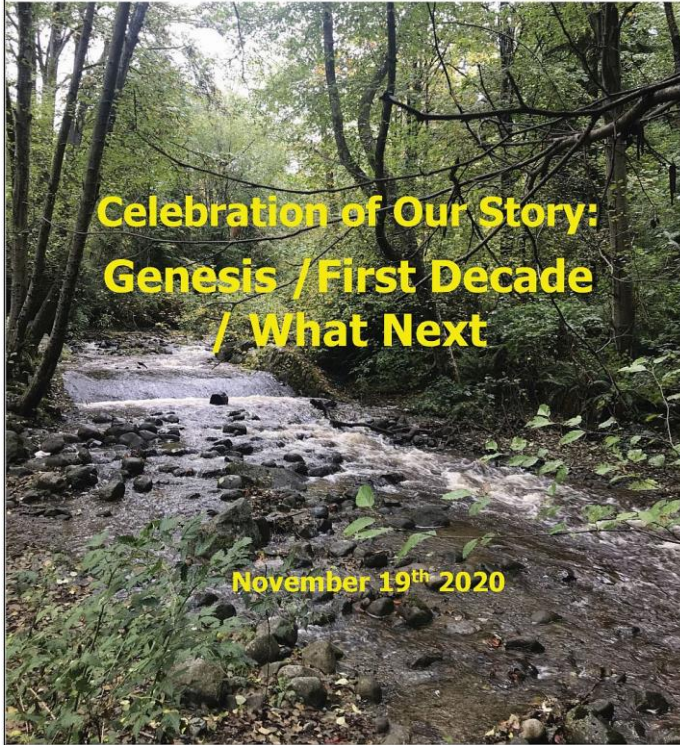
“WE NEED A RENEWED PROVINCIAL EMPHASIS – and yes, that means budget - ON SUPPORTING COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL PLANNING. AND WE NEED ANOTHER DARLENE MARZARI,” concludes Joan Sawicki.



“There are initiatives and programs flourishing today that had their beginnings in the Georgia Basin Initiative. And isn't that how turning that supertanker of thinking happens? Just incrementally, then by gosh, we end up going in a whole different direction than we were when we started.”



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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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