

## Tuesday, September 15, 2009

### [What's Driving Settlement Change in the Mid-Vancouver Island Region?](#)

*by Tim Pringle*

(This article was prepared as part of Tim's presentation to the Convening for Action Vancouver Island [CAVI] Learning Lunch series to start in Courtenay, BC on September 24, 2009. For more information about CAVI and the current Learning Lunches series, [please click here...](#))

A strong argument can be made that the east coast of the mid-[Vancouver Island](#) region is one market for [real estate](#) development. According to research being done by the [Real Estate Foundation](#), many factors indicate that this is indeed the case. In this context, all communities – from Cobble Hill to Campbell River – will continue to see a number of real estate development proposals at their front counters.

Given this demand, regional and local governments are in a relatively strong position with regard to development. They have the option of implementing more stringent assessment of the opportunity costs and benefits represented in these proposals. Over time, a more stringent assessment and approach to managing settlement change should enable communities to realize more benefits than liabilities from the development that takes place.

Some persuasive data describe demographic change and real development activity in the mid-Island region. Among British Columbia's eight development regions, the Vancouver Island Coast Region ranked 3rd in [population growth](#) (36%, or 1.8% annually) in the period 1986-2006. In comparison, the four regional districts comprising the mid-island region – east coast (Cowichan, [Nanaimo](#), [Comox](#) and Srathcona) – expanded their populations by 49% or 2.49% per year. Of 10 regional districts in the development region, the [Comox Valley Regional District](#) ranked 3rd with 56% (2.8% annually) increase in population (Regional Economic Analysis, [Vancouver Island Economic Alliance](#) -2008). Of all BC development regions, only the Mainland Southwest matched the growth rate of the mid-Island.

Obviously this rate of growth far exceeds the net of births and deaths, which actually is negative. In the Comox Valley, for example, 30% of individuals reported in the 2006 Census lived at a BC address outside of the Valley (Courtenay CMA), or in a different province or country in 2001. Only 375 immigrants came to the Valley in the 2001 to 2006 period. Thus, nearly all mobile individuals came from another place in BC (including Vancouver Island) or Canada. During the census interval, roughly half of the migrants and immigrants replaced individuals leaving the Valley; the other half provided net growth.

Since the late-1980s, large scale real estate developments have become increasingly common in the mid-Island region. According to the [BC Stats "Major Projects Inventory"](#) (values of \$15 million or more), there now are 35 projects – including a residential component – which are proposed (19), under way (12), or on hold (4) in the mid-Island region. These include infill, brown-field, and green-field sites. One or two are "complete communities" (that is, they include

all types of land use as well as ecological conservation provisions). Several are mixed use developments where residential uses occur with commercial, retail, and institutional. Several are residential only and may include a recreation focus such as a spa or golf course.

Most of these proposals emphasize and capitalize on the natural amenities of the mid-Island region. The familiar real estate promotions citing access to beaches, waterfront, wildlife, nature, etc expect price premiums based on proximity to waterscapes and other natural features. In addition to these amenities, because of the historic [EN Land Grant](#), the mid-Island region offers large tracts of privately owned land that investors hope to have rezoned. Some development proposals present watershed locations and site allocations to diverse land uses that make them very difficult to evaluate.

Local and regional governments are acutely aware of the pressures arising from real estate development demand in their jurisdictions and throughout the mid-island region.

The list of challenges is legendary including:

- managing supply and usage of potable water,
- handling rainwater, grey/black water and the attendant ecological concerns,
- adopting design with nature strategies and technologies,
- inclusion of attainable housing in the inventory of new residential development,
- location of developments (infill, brown-field, green-field),
- evaluating land uses, conservation uses, transportation services, and design footprint, etc. to manage green house gas emissions.

Fortunately for the Comox Valley, the regional district and municipalities are preparing well to manage the persistent, large-scale settlement change. The [Regional Growth Strategy](#) and [Regional Conservation Strategy](#) are 2 of several regional planning processes that will declare values and priorities. Beyond the adoption of the plans lie the challenges of joint-perspective on settlement change and strategic joint-management.

These challenges go beyond the bounds of the Comox Valley. Indeed, they face all communities on Vancouver Island's east coast that are living the legacy of the EN Land Grant of the 1800s. Stepping back to look at the really big picture, the question for communities from Cobble Hill to Campbell River remains: How do they deal with the legacy of this historic context? How do they align their efforts to ensure the right development in the right place in the right time? Market pressures are significant, but at this time, and given our increasing understanding of the costs and benefits of changing land uses, local and regional government is well-placed to be more directive and positive in it's approach to development proposals than it has ever been in the past.