

1000 Trees at a Time: How One City is Stepping Towards its Climate Action Charter Goals

by hans peter meyer

Tim Pringle recently put the Climate Action Charter (CAC) into the context of property values. “Ultimately,” he said, “it’s a dollars and cents kind of world.” But Tim wasn't saying, *OK folks, all this enviro stuff is making real estate too expensive*. If anything, Pringle, who's been at the cutting edge of real estate and land use research in BC for over 20 years has a twist on 'bottom-line' optics that may surprise many. Especially those involved in the buying and selling of homes. “One can imagine a number of possibilities,” he said, apropos communities not taking positive steps to address the imbalance between settlement and ecosystems. “Some of these will become unfortunate truths for those places that don’t adjust. That don’t ... put their overall settlement activities into the context of a sustainability plan.”

From a taxpayer, investor, and homeowner point of view the situation could be ugly. “Wouldn’t it be terrible,” Pringle wondered, “if in say 40 years, your community was having problems with ground water and people were losing property value because of a lack of assurance that there wasn’t adequate water? Or, it was extremely expensive and people looked elsewhere to live just because it was too expensive...because of water[-related issues]?”

The up side is that 174 of 187 local governments in BC have signed on the Climate Action Charter (CAC). Of these, Pringle cites my town, the City of Courtenay, as showing considerable leadership.

Frankly, I was a little surprised about Courtenay’s leadership position. I suppose it’s because I just don’t give the folks at City Hall enough respect. Nor do I appreciate how the tireless efforts of stewardship groups have made an impact on decision-makers, civic staff, and electors. Things are changing quickly in my little burg, and I’m starting to feel proud of the fact. The most recent sign of change is the City's "1000 Trees" initiative.

I love trees (love to plant ‘em, love to grow ‘em, love to enjoy their shade and myriad living benefits, love to cut ‘em down and make firewood and boards out of ‘em too). But it wasn’t until I stopped by the City’s Earth Day table that I heard about the “1000 Trees” initiative, one of my biggest reasons for feeling proud of my town.

In partnership with a local nursery, the City is sponsoring a substantial discount on up to 3 trees

per household. To get my 3 trees I'll have to make a trek to City Hall before the end of May. I'll get my coupons and trundle off to the nursery for some fruit trees to put some food on my table, some shade and water conservation activity into in my urban footprint. All of it good stuff. All of it "responsible citizen" stuff.

The City isn't doing this to beautify my yard. It's part of their commitment to meeting green house gas (GHG) emission reduction targets they've taken on as signatories to the provincial Climate Action Charter. The goal is for local governments to become carbon neutral by 2012. Not a lot of time. Civic staff estimate that the "1000 trees" action will "offset two tonnes of carbon emissions each year for 80 years." I'm impressed.

Hats off to the City of Courtenay for helping me — and others (about 700 tree coupons out so far...) — with my postage stamp urban forest. But the City is earning my respect (and market advantage for real estate agents) for other climate change actions. The list includes:

- encouraging higher densities generally and moving ahead with raising building height (we now have a 7 storey option in some parts of town — how I wish we'd had a couple of these mid-rises close to the store when I was in retail downtown);
- participating in 3 related current regional planning processes that will have a positive impact on all of us over the next 20-50 years (the Sustainability Planning process, Regional Growth Strategy, and the Regional Conservation Strategy);
- supporting the Learning Lunches offered by Convening for Action Vancouver Island (CAVI), one of the best ways I've seen of getting inter-regional discussion and learning about new approaches to dealing with water and development issues;
- willingness to work with eNGOs like the Comox Valley Land Trust.

As a taxpayer, I see the tax dollars invested in the "1000 trees" as an example of local government money smarts: money spent today is paying down the cost of dealing with climate change in the long term. I hope to see the same kind of money smarts when it comes to investing in public transit over more roads and bridges. Our climate is changing. It's not a 'political' issue; it's a civic and fiscal responsibility issue.

For more on the "1000 trees" initiative: www.city.courtenay.bc.ca/news/1000-trees-in-courtenay.aspx

For more on the Climate Action Charter: www.cd.gov.bc.ca/ministry/whatsnew/climate_action_charter_update.htm

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