

**COWICHAN VALLEY REGIONAL DISTRICT**  
**REGIONAL OFFICIAL COMMUNITY PLAN FOR THE ELECTORAL AREAS**  
**BACKGROUNDER & CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE MODERNIZATION**

**Introduction**

In 2018, the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) created a “new regionalism” approach for planning based on governance and process while building cross-sectoral coalitions that support trusting relationships among regional interests. The resulting Cowichan 2050 Regional Collaboration Framework (Cowichan 2050) informs the vision statement guiding this CVRD regional official community plan for the electoral areas (regional OCP). The aspirations are foundational in the harmonized official community plan known as regional OCP as several electoral area official community plans included objectives and policies on resilience and sustainability. This regional, collaborative approach helps accommodate change, especially in two priority areas: growth management and climate adaptation. While the Cowichan 2050 document was aspirational in nature and not legally binding, the key concepts are captured here to inform readers of the tenants and foundations that support and inform the regional OCP.

**Aspirations for the Future**

The regional OCP represents the community’s vision for the future and provides the framework and directions, developed in partnership by CVRD municipalities and electoral areas, to guide growth and decision-making around the use and management of land and water resources in the regional OCP plan area. The regional OCP vision and goals build on the four aspirations expressed in the Cowichan 2050 backgrounder, reproduced below.

*Resilience: Strengthen our adaptive capacity*

Our region is already dealing with chronic stresses such as rising unaffordability, economic volatility and water supply issues. In the coming years, we anticipate seeing these stresses increase and experiencing new stresses such as an aging population and sea-level rise. As climate change accelerates, we also expect to become more exposed to sudden, acute shocks such as coastal flooding and more frequent and intense storms. Regional resilience bridges the gap between disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. It moves away from traditional disaster risk management, which is founded on risk assessments that relate to specific hazards. Instead, it accepts the possibility that a wide range of disruptive events—both stress and shocks—may occur but are not necessarily predictable. We must improve our region’s overall resilience by strengthening the adaptive capacity of our communities and supporting systems. This will require us to work together as a region to proactively identify and address our vulnerabilities.

*Sustainability: Optimize growth and environmental stewardship*

The Cowichan Valley is currently experiencing steady population growth, and we anticipate growth pressures will continue to be a significant factor over the coming decades. This challenge will be exacerbated by climate change impacts that will place further stress on our watersheds, ecosystems, food systems and communities. In this context, supporting sustainable, coordinated

growth, while encouraging continued environmental stewardship, is a cornerstone goal for our region.

### *Liveability: Enhance quality of life and social well-being*

Our region is one of the most livable places in Canada. We have a great climate, a vibrant and prosperous economy, incredible outdoor recreation options, high quality community services, great infrastructure and so much more. However, in part because of this appeal, housing and food costs are on the rise, and we're also experiencing an influx of newcomers. Our challenge is to maintain and improve livability in the face of this growth. Key challenges include tackling housing affordability issues, managing growth so that our communities retain the qualities that make them special and unique (e.g., our rural character and community connectedness), and making sure that our built environment supports the health and well-being of all residents.

### *Relationships: Build strong, inclusive connections*

Social belonging and engagement are key components of community well-being. The Cowichan Valley is home to 350 active volunteer-led organizations, as well as strong arts, culture and heritage sectors committed to making positive change. However, our region's income gap is growing, housing insecurity is on the rise, and vulnerable populations such as Indigenous Peoples, visible minorities and female lone-parent families face systemic barriers such as poverty, difficulty accessing employment opportunities and pay gaps. To address these challenges, our region must make a collective commitment to improving diversity, inclusivity and social equity in all spheres of community life. Building stronger relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians through the ongoing journey of reconciliation is also key. In turn, these commitments will enable us to continue the hard work of building stronger relationships in the Cowichan Valley, both across and within communities.

## **Sustainability and Resilience**

Two of the terms used in the regional OCP's vision statement, sustainability and resilience, are key to its success and merit further elaboration, as they are central to the manner in which the goals, objectives and policies of the regional OCP are established.

### **Sustainability**

Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain a current state of being indefinitely. In planning terms, that means sustaining our communities, our economy and our environment in something close to their present state. The details will always vary—the components of the economy, the types of communities and the people who inhabit them, the evolution of ecosystems—but the essential quality of life will be consistent from one decade to the next.

The Cowichan Valley's regional population is projected to grow by more than 20% between 2017 and 2051.<sup>1</sup> A significantly larger population means a greater need for amenities such as housing, employment and reliable supplies of food and water. Logically, that suggests the need for more local food production, yet the amount of land being farmed in the region shrunk by almost half

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<sup>1</sup> *Population, Housing & Employment Projections for the Cowichan Valley Regional District's Modernized Official Community Plan*. Rennie, 2019, p. 7.

between 1991 and 2011.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, water supplies—both surface water and underground aquifers—are under threat from a combination of increased demand from development and urban population growth.

Although population growth places more demands on a community, it can bring positive effects as well, including cultural diversification, an abundance of new energy and useful skills for an economy in transition. Even with the projected temperature increase, the climate will remain mild by global standards and may result in an influx of climate refugees.<sup>3</sup>

Forest cover continues to diminish with the harvesting on timber lands of young trees that are cut as soon as they become marketable—and long before they replace the functionality of a natural forest and the rich biological system it supports. Less than 30% of the historic natural levels of old forest remain, and there are no more intact watersheds in the region.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, the disappearance of forests results in loss of wildlife habitat and travel corridors, as well as diminished biodiversity. Of increasing relevance today, every tree removed results in release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Government acquisition of forested lands for protection would be a significant contributor to climate change mitigation.

Changes such as these are largely measurable, and manageable with careful planning. However, the great unknown today is the magnitude and types of impacts we can expect from climate change. It's difficult to plan for eventualities so hard to predict and so dependent on another unknown—the ability of global and local communities to take necessary steps to mitigate climate change and manufacture the political will to do so.

## Resilience

The transition to sustainable economies involves significant shifts in how we live and work, including the application and use of technological advances and alternative transportation methods. Keeping equilibrium while climate change forecasts and technological innovations are rapidly evolving is a growing challenge for planning and policy. Such rapid evolution also creates a 'rate of change' challenge to adapt more quickly that needs to be better understood if governments are to provide leadership and continuous high levels of service to citizens while maintaining strong economies and developing stronger, resilient communities.

Communities that take an integrated approach to planning for rapid and sometimes unpredictable changes will be at the forefront of mitigation and adaptation efforts and, consequently, will be more resilient to potentially negative effects of change. Such an approach will require recognition of major cross-cutting, inter-jurisdictional regional issues that demand coordinated, collaborative and innovative approaches to planning that move beyond conventional means and processes.

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<sup>2</sup> Cowichan Region State of the Environment Report Update 2014: Farm Land and Food Security, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cowichan Valley Regional District (2017). *Climate Projections for the Cowichan Valley Regional District*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Cowichan Valley Regional District, *Cowichan Region State of the Environment Report Update 2014: Introduction to the Cowichan Region*, p. 4.

This harmonized official community plan, by taking these realities into account, aspires to improve the Cowichan region's readiness for change and strengthen its resilience in a manner that is

*Resourceful*  
*Economically*  
*Sustainable*  
*Innovative*  
*Liveable*  
*Integrated*  
*Ecologically*  
*Natural*  
*Tolerant*

### **Building a Sustainable, Resilient Future**

Environmental, economic and social objectives and policies in the harmonized official community plan support the development of resilient systems that reflect the resourcefulness of our people and institutions to flexibly adapt to both present challenges and future events, thus providing a necessary and pragmatic approach to achieving sustainability throughout the region. Increased resilience theoretically results in enhanced sustainability.

Resilient systems withstand, respond to and adapt more readily to shocks and stresses, bounce back stronger after tough times and live better in good times (Rockefeller Foundation, 2015). The resilience index identified for cities by the Rockefeller Foundation can be adapted to a rural/urban interface in the regional context. The index identified the following seven qualities of resilience: reflectiveness, resourcefulness, robustness, redundancy, flexibility, inclusiveness and integration. These qualities are threaded through the electoral area OCP objectives and policies, form the foundation of this regional OCP, and may be defined broadly as follows.

Reflectiveness and resourcefulness describe the ability to learn from the past and act in times of crisis. Individuals and institutions that are reflective use experience to inform future decisions and to modify their standards and behaviours accordingly. For example, planning processes that are reflective are better able to respond to changing circumstances such as the objectives and policies of regional OCPs.

Resourceful people and institutions can recognize alternative ways to use resources at times of crisis in order to meet their needs or achieve their goals. Regional OCPs may focus attention regionally on available resources and plan accordingly for a regional approach.

Robustness, redundancy and flexibility describe the ability to conceive and put into place systems and assets that can withstand shocks and stresses as well as the willingness to use alternative strategies to facilitate rapid recovery. These qualities are reflected in this harmonized official community plan's natural systems' objectives and policies.

Robust design is well conceived, constructed and managed and includes making provision to ensure failure is predictable, safe and not disproportionate to the cause. The regional OCP policies aim to direct growth accordingly.

Redundancy refers to spare capacity purposively created to accommodate disruption due to extreme pressures, surges in demand or an external event. It includes diversity where there are multiple ways to achieve a given need and adaptation policies for climate change.

Flexibility refers to the willingness and ability to adopt alternative strategies in response to changing circumstances or sudden crises. Regional OCP policies with flexibility respond to this resilience quality.

Inclusive and integrated address the needs of the most vulnerable and collectively aim to create complete communities. The regional OCP policies are inclusive of all of society. The resilient region is also inclusive and accountable in planning for future generations.

Regional resilience is the adaptive capacity to respond to crises, such as natural disasters including flooding, and to socio-economic challenges such as affordable housing. Regional resilience bridges the gap between disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. It moves away from traditional disaster risk management, which is founded on risk assessments that relate to specific hazards. Instead, it accepts the possibility that a wide range of disruptive events—both stress and shocks—may occur but are not necessarily predictable.

## **Direction and Challenges for the Modernization**

As the Cowichan Valley Regional District moves toward a sustainable and resilient future, regional planning challenges will arise. Meaningful, holistic solutions will depend on regional collaboration and coordination, in particular in two key areas: growth management and climate change.

### **Growth Management**

Growth management is tied to several planning areas, notably ecosystems and biodiversity, transportation, services and infrastructure, and climate adaptation. In the Cowichan region, electoral areas and municipalities have been planning for growth and change within their own boundaries. A single plan facilitates a more consistent and coordinated approach to regional planning.

There are ten regional growth strategies in the province, but the CVRD does not have one. Local governments in the region are managing residential growth and development through OCPs that include defined growth areas. Directing growth to regional and local town and village centres is a commonly shared objective in the Cowichan region; however, the defined growth areas are not consistently aligned with water service provision or contained growth. One of the challenges and objectives of the regional OCP is to redefine the village and urban containment centres as growth containment boundaries and identify rural protection boundaries. The growth containment boundaries would be aligned with service provision. The regional OCP will capture all electoral areas and identify the growth containment boundaries of neighbouring local governments with policies aimed to harmonize on service provision over time.

The regional OCP policies are aligned with the principle of achieving sustainability, both in human settlement priorities and in ensuring ecological balance. One tool for doing so is an emphasis on compact communities and density that respects the environment's carrying capacity. This tool will receive clearer definition and fine-tuning in the regional OCP modernization phase, along with definition of regional urban containment boundaries.

The [CVRD Water and Wastewater Utilities Review and Assessment for the Cowichan Valley Regional District](#) (Innova Strategy Group, 2017) recommends that official community plans limit fragmented growth with policy that links growth, operational efficiency, and financial sustainability for the services that support projected growth. This strategic integration will lead to significant cost savings for utility users within the CVRD.

There are 38 water and wastewater utilities managed by the CVRD. Several additional privately owned and managed water utilities exist. Some small utilities are known liabilities or close to failure.

## Climate Change

Never in history has the interlocking and symbiotic relationship between sustainability and resilience been more important than it is now and will be in the decades to come. That relationship is also our best bet in meeting and mitigating the challenges that come with climate change.

According to recent projections, the annual average temperature in the Cowichan region will increase by almost 3°C by 2050, and warmer winters will result in a reduction of frost-free days by 63%. Although summer drought will increase, a significant increase of precipitation in other seasons, especially in the fall and with more intense storm events, will result in an overall increase of 5% in annual precipitation.<sup>5</sup> Adding to the general wetness, sea levels are expected to rise up to a metre by the end of the century,<sup>6</sup> and more frequent and severe storm surges will magnify ocean intrusion onto land. And then there are the myriad other even less measurable effects of climate change, including species extinctions and the spread of destructive invasive species.

It is imperative that land use planning provisions err on the side of caution in taking account of a wide range of effects including sea level rise, rainfall levels, drought, availability of water supplies for domestic and industrial use, changes in species distribution (both flora and fauna) and size of population, and viability of economically important wild species such as Pacific salmon and of agricultural crop types.

The implications of climate change for environmental, economic and community sustainability should not be underestimated. That means preparing for the worst and transforming risk into opportunities for the region's economy, environment, communities and subsequent generations.

The precautionary principle, adopted by the community of nations at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and embraced by every level of Canadian government since, has potential implications for how we address not only risk of harm to the environment but also risk of exacerbating rather than mitigating climate change. The precautionary principle states that if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public or to the environment, in the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful, the burden of proof that it is not harmful falls on those proposing the action. Since decisions at the regional level need to be based on an understanding that a healthy natural environment is essential to a healthy living environment for

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<sup>5</sup> Cowichan Valley Regional District (2017). *Climate Projections for the Cowichan Valley Regional District*, pp. iii-iv.

<sup>6</sup> Cowichan Valley Regional District, *Cowichan Region State of the Environment Update 2014: Climate Action*, p. 3.



community members and a healthy local economy, the precautionary principle is an integral component of the process of making land use decisions.

The CVRD's recent report, [\*Climate Projections for the Cowichan Valley Regional District\*](#), identifies the critical importance of regional collaboration in preparing for the changes ahead. Planning for long-term demand, security of supply, projected impacts of climate change, energy source transitions, and water reclamation and shortages requires supporting policy and program recommendations to ensure future needs are successfully anticipated and met. Provincial legislation emphasizes GHG emissions reduction.

CVRD Engineering Services has led a number of adaptation initiatives. As climate change impacts are projected to accelerate in the next 50 years, there is a critical planning need to focus additional efforts on adaptation, building on work that is currently underway. Identified next steps include a collaborative, region-wide climate vulnerability and risk assessment to better understand climate hazards across the region and the development of a coastal flood management strategy for adaptation to sea level rise. Climate change is one area where coordinated regional planning could be undertaken institutionally without significant additional resources.

### [\*Regional Planning Challenges\*](#)

While building a climate change-ready region founded in sustainability and resilience, there are other, microcosmic planning challenges that require specific attention. Development of the following will help the modernized official community plan develop into a more robust and holistic planning tool.

### [\*Ecosystem Stewardship and Biodiversity Conservation\*](#)

Interconnected challenges related to population growth, urban development and climate change, place significant pressure on the CVRD's diversity and natural assets. Opportunities for necessary protective measures include developing a regional conservation strategy to improve connectivity between ecosystems and to allow for the movement of species between and within them.

### [\*Watershed Protection Plan\*](#)

Cowichan communities are aware of pressure from development, contamination, depletion, population growth and climate change and are working collaboratively to address them through efforts that include the work being coordinated by the Cowichan Watershed Board. Other opportunities remain for developing coordinated watershed management plans for regional watersheds currently lacking plans (e.g., Shawnigan Lake watershed) and to enhance work with First Nations and other management partners on the development and implementation of existing and new watershed management plans.

### [\*Transportation\*](#)

Auto-dependence is responsible for generating most greenhouse gases in the CVRD's unincorporated areas (79% versus 58% provincially), but it is also linked to limited mobility options for the young, the old and those unable to afford a private vehicle ([\*Community Energy and Emissions Inventory, 2010\*](#)). The CVRD identified an opportunity for developing a broad regional transportation plan that identifies areas of partnership and collaboration around core regional

transportation issues (e.g., transit, active transportation connections and facilities) (see [Transit Future Plan March 2012 Cowichan Valley Region](#)).

### *First Nations Relationships*

First Nations with reserve lands in the Cowichan Valley are continuing to enhance and expand land management authorities, capacities and opportunities. Some are also expanding their land base through the B.C. treaty process. While the CVRD and local governments have worked and partnered with different First Nations on a range of initiatives from watershed management to servicing and local economic development projects, more collaborative land use planning projects have been relatively limited. Experience in other regional districts (such as Alberni-Clayoquot, Powell River, Capital and Comox) has demonstrated the value of building fuller relationships and partnerships with First Nations in the spirit of reconciliation.

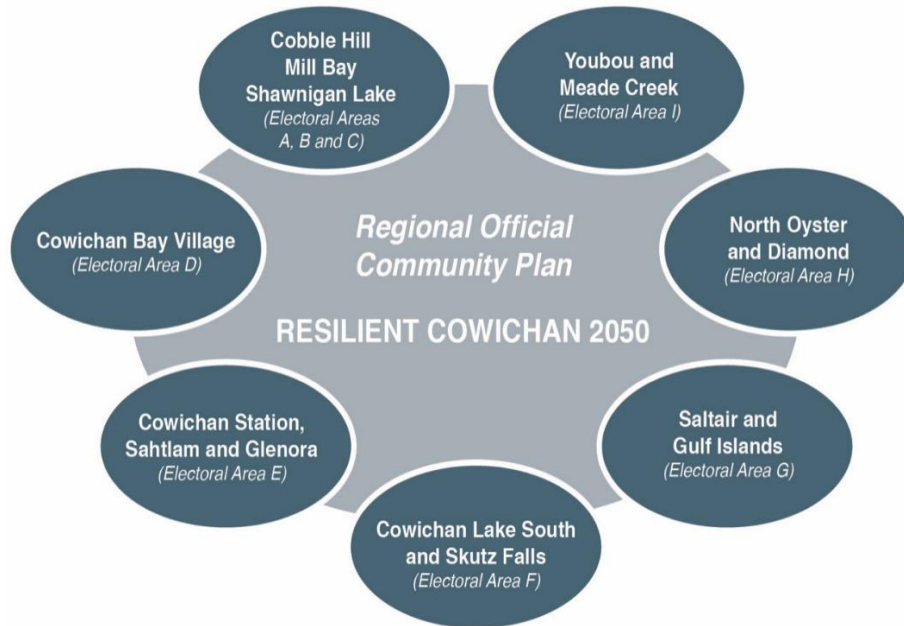
### **Considerations for the Modernization of the regional OCP**

The next phase—modernization of the OCP—will consider the following practical revisions, aiming for overall improved applicability, cohesiveness and readability:

- the effectiveness of local area plans
- objectives and policies relating to emerging land use management issues and actions to achieve those objectives and policies linked to regional indicators
- changes in provincial laws and regional land use management policies
- simplification and clarification of land use and development permit area designations, including boundaries and definitions, and of natural hazard planning areas
- targeted range of densities for residential sub-designations
- reviewing the development permit areas
- reviewing the growth containment boundaries and service provision capacity
- defining compact communities
- a marine official community plan for the marine foreshore of electoral areas A, C, D, G and H
- a coastal flood mitigation bylaw and/or a marine development permit area;
- updated mapping for the development permit areas;
- updated mapping to reflect the new land use designations; and
- revisions for clarity and brevity.



*Figure 1.0 Harmonization of CVRD Electoral Area OCPs in One Regional OCP*



*Figure 1.0 depicts the seven electoral area official community plans (representing nine electoral areas) that are harmonized in the CVRD's official community plan.*