

Public gathering places needed to build community

By Doug Holmes

We all go through life not just as individuals but as members of a community where social ties and common interests connect us with other people. Being part of a community means caring about the wellbeing of the community as a whole.

In Summerland, we build and strengthen community every time we shop locally, attend public events, participate in local activities, volunteer our time, or simply help a neighbour – anything that creates a feeling of togetherness.

Community development is linked with economic development and social wellness. The role of local government in these areas is to provide the infrastructure and create the conditions for the community to come together and thrive.

Conversely, senior levels of government and other service providers often inadvertently work at cross-purposes with community development by prioritizing efficiency over customer service and access. The on-going centralization of offices into regional cities means that residents of towns like Summerland increasingly must leave their community to obtain services that had once been available locally.

Some people will remember when Summerland had its own hospital and its own school board. We also used to have a francophone school, Okanagan College campus, Red Cross branch, various social supports and wrap-around services, and until recently a doctors' walk-in clinic.

Summerland has a long, proud history of being a strong and self-sufficient community but every time we lose an amenity, we lose a bit of our allure. Gradually our constancy to Summerland wains as we spend more time and money shopping, attending events, participating in activities, and volunteering in the places where we are now forced to regularly go to access services.

Community development is a factor to consider in the upcoming referendum on a new multi-purpose recreation centre. When we go to the polls on Nov. 4, we are voting on more than just a swimming pool; we're making a decision on what kind of community we want to be. Do we want to remain a close-knit community with strong local bonds, or are we okay evolving into a *de facto* suburb of Penticton and identify more with the wider region?

Both are valid identities and already many people gravitate more to one than the other. However, it should be noted that for nearly five decades, the existing Summerland Aquatic and Fitness Centre has been more than just a building, it has been a community hub where people of all ages come together. Youth come together to learn to swim and make friends, adults come together to stay fit, people struck with injury or illness come together to recover, and seniors come together to maintain their physical and mental health.

To be a community, we need public spaces and amenities that bring people together. With the old aquatic centre nearing the end of its life, a new recreation centre would be an investment in our community and serve as an important gathering place for decades to come.

For further information on the proposed recreation centre, visit: summerland.ca/recreationcentre

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland.