

Community Resilience

By Mayor Boot - February 4, 2021

A term that is increasingly used by Council and staff at the District of Summerland is “resilience”. In fact, one of the six themes of the District’s 2019-2022 Strategic Priorities is Community Resilience: “Utilizing resources to create and adapt programs and services that support a vibrant and livable community.”

Community resilience can also be defined as “the ability of a community to absorb disturbance and still retain basic function and structure” (resilience.org). Disturbances might include impacts to any—or all—of the three inter-connected aspects of sustainability: economic, environmental and social.

For example, consider how both the changing climate and the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impact all three aspects of sustainability. (Early days of the health crisis may have had a positive affect on the environment as millions of people stopped driving to work, but what is the negative environmental impact of the disposal of billions of masks?)

Note that it takes a community to build resilience—an ongoing process that sometimes requires fundamental changes. So, while the District’s role is to intentionally guide Summerland’s process of adaptation, the power to envision the future of our community (including for future generations) lies in community members.

Healthy citizens—those that live in a vibrant and livable community—are resilient citizens who, in turn, create a healthy and resilient community.

Over the last year, Council and District staff have undertaken several initiatives to build resilience for the challenges that lie ahead.

1. Recognizing the continued impact of COVID-19 on Summerland residents, Council—with strategic use of the COVID-10 Safe Restart Grant—was able to keep the proposed property tax increase to 1.65%. Because of the significant impacts on District revenues from COVID, this could not have been accomplished without the District’s determined senior management team who reduced the \$1.4M budget deficit to just over one-tenth that amount without reducing service levels or compromising either Council or operational priorities.

In addition to the Historical Recapture approach (recouping operational dollars spent or revenue lost in 2020), Council took a Forward Thinking (Building Resilience) approach to Safe Restart Grant spending. For example, because the District is anticipating future budget pressures, such as increased costs, Council has ensured that over \$1M of the Grant remains unallocated. Further, as in 2019 and 2020, Council has directed money to our strategic reserves to help fund future infrastructure upgrades or replacements.

2. Like only four other B.C. municipalities, Summerland’s owns its electric utility. This means the District buys electricity at a wholesale cost and uses publicly-owned infrastructure (power poles, transformers, lines, etc.) to distribute electricity to Summerland users. A number of alternative energy initiatives were started, completed or saw progression in 2020 including:

receipt of grant funding to install an additional 22 electric vehicle charging stations (including three fast chargers); solar panels installed on municipal hall; a location selection for the solar + battery storage project plus grant funding to remediate a brownfield site; and an electric Zamboni replaced one powered by propane in the District's fleet.

Council is expecting to receive the Summerland Energy Strategy from senior staff in the coming months.

The District is building resilience by upgrading our electric and alternate energy infrastructure and exploring the untapped benefits of the District-owned electric utility.

3. District staff estimates, conservatively, that 20-30% of household waste going into the Summerland landfill is organic food waste. Diverting this waste from the landfill to the Summerland Organics Processing Facility—an enclosed facility built on an impermeable surface—positively impacts a number of environmental issues. These include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, leachate and odour (decomposing organic material creates methane gas, liquid runoff, and, well, smells bad!). Bonus and significant benefits from the facility are the production of a high-quality Class “A” compost (a compost with wastewater sludge, while in the same enclosed facility, is produced separately) and the facility will prolong the life of the landfill.

4. All District of Summerland lands are on traditional and territory of the syilx (Okanagan) Peoples, some of which borders Reserve land. Recognizing this opportunity and the strength in partnering in resilience, one of Council's guiding principles is to strengthen our relationship with the Penticton Indian Band (PIB)/Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) and work on Reconciliation. Although we cannot meet in person again yet, meetings and learnings will continue with the recently-elected Chief and Council of PIB in 2021.

The PIB has written a letter supporting the proposed Summerland Recreation and Health Centre and District staff is working with the ONA and others on the Trout Creek Fish Restoration Project and has supported their application for grant funding. Graham Statt, Summerland's chief administrative officer, has many years of experience working with First Nations people in his former role with the Alberta Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and he looks forward to meeting and working with the PIB.

Similar to building community resilience, Reconciliation is an ongoing process, is mindful of future generations and, in this case, requires community-to-community involvement.

5. Addressing racism, a social matter, is another objective within Council's Community Resilience theme as it relates to a livable community. All residents have the right to feel safe in Summerland, whether at home, at school or when out in the community. In July 2020, Council passed a resolution to direct staff to work with local non-profits to develop Conversations About Racism. This work, funded in part by Resilience BC through the South Okanagan Similkameen Respect Network (SOSRN) is one of the initiatives being undertaken by South Okanagan Immigrant and Community Services (SOICS). Three District representatives attend SOSRN meetings.

6. All residents also deserve the dignity of suitable housing and, although the District is not in the development or construction sector, in January 2020 Council wrote letters of support for two affordable housing projects proposed for downtown Summerland. The Affordable Summerland (2017) report clearly identified the need for a broad range of housing options in Summerland. An increase in stock generally, accompanied by homes that are affordable (rental or market)—particularly when within the fully serviced downtown area—will increase accessibility and, arguably, lower the average cost of housing.

Living in a global health emergency for almost eleven months has shown us that, when necessary, we can pull together as a community. It takes the community to build resilience—to create a vision for the next few decades and generations beyond. And, although it may require compromise or even transformative change, that is the power of the community of Summerland.