

Celebrating Earth Day ☿ in an Age ☿ of Cities

*Every normal man must be tempted at times to spit upon his hands, hoist the black flag,
and begin slitting throats*

~ Henry Lewis Mencken

 when Comox Valley had its first Earth Day celebration on April 21st, it joined the world community's environmental struggles. Held alongside the Farmers Market and Demonstration Garden, lined with environmental education booths and eco-friendly products, attended by a huge showing of Valley residents and made successful by the dedication of many volunteers, the event was a tribute to this socially-conscious community and many of our environmentally-friendly attributes. But Earth Day isn't about pats on the back.

The event's theme was "what on Earth can we do?" and as guest speaker Des Kennedy answered that question, I couldn't help but think of Henry Lewis Mencken's famous quote.

Kennedy reflected on past environmental battles, such as those that saved Seal Bay Park, Buckley Bay, and Clayoquot Sound, remembering a time when the sides were clear – there were those who worked to preserve nature and the human community, and those who sought to exploit them. He spoke to the crowd about the Comox Valley's looming tragedies, about development corporations, the Vancouver Island Health Authority, and big box stores.

Are these battles any different than those of the past? Is there not an obvious line between the exploiters and preservers? Kennedy scoffed at Walmart's organic marketing tactics, Home Depots eco-friendly products, and the many politicians who snubbed past environmental movements, but are now proclaiming themselves 'green.' His answer is yes, these are the same battles, but with different

packaging. And to our theme question, what on Earth can we do? 'Resist' is all he said, as those who truly believe in nature and the human community have always done.

Kennedy's speech was an inspiration, but the truth is the Valley now faces a challenge that bears no resemblance to any of those of the past. A challenge that will never define a side, enemy, or savior; and one that no amount of resistance will ever stop or even slow. There is, without a doubt, an intelligent way to face our future, and, as always, a destructive way. But before we can even begin the decades of discourse, planning, and citizen activism required to guarantee a sustainable and livable habitat for generations to come, we must first accept and embrace what approaches.

Comox Valley is growing. Like a teenager, it faces an approaching adulthood – city status – with excitement and angst, questions and confusion. It looks at the other cities and sees every environmental and social problem the world has to offer, and like most teenagers, the Comox Valley doesn't want to grow up.

Our fears are nothing new. Every nation in the world has made some effort to stop urban development and shift its population growth to rural areas. But the migration continues. By the end of 2008, for the first time in human history, more than half the world's population will live in an urban area.

More than any other event, Earth Day isn't about celebrating the present, but creating hope for the future. In the WorldWatch Institutes 2007 report, Janice E. Perlman and Mally O'Meara Sheehan asked

three questions concerning our approaching age of cities: What can be done to make our urban future a desirable and sustainable one? What kinds of cities foster conviviality and creativity? How can poverty and environmental degradation be alleviated and a voice for the disenfranchised be ensured?

Answering these questions on a global scale is more than overwhelming, but it's up to the small fraction of our planet's population who live in rich, developed nations to find the answers. After all, how can we look down our noses at China's coal burning, India's third world populations, or Latin America's polluted streets, when we, with our immensity of wealth and a fraction of the problems can't even bring justice or sustainability to a population of 20,000.

My hope for the future is that the Comox Valley will not only become a city, but a global leader in sustainable development. Just as Malmo, Sweden did with the Turning Torso apartment on the Western Harbour, which grinds all organic waste into biogas for cooking and fuel for vehicles; just as Rizhao in Northern China did, with solar water heaters in 99 percent of its households and photovoltaic solar cells powering almost every traffic signal, street light, and park illuminator; just as London did when Mayor Ken Livingstone successfully levied a congestion tax against every car that drove downtown, using the money for external vehicle costs, such as pollution and accidents; and just as Dongtan in China, expected to become the world's first sustainable city, will do.

By 2010 Dongtan will house 50,000 and 500,000 by 2040. Turf, vegetation, and solar panels will dominate its skyline. Its homes and offices will recycle 80 percent of solid waste and organic waste will be composted or burned for heat. Only vehicles powered by electricity or fuel cells will drive the cities streets. If China, still considered by many to exist in the third world, is building this environmental leader from the ground up, what on Earth can we do?

Walking back and forth between the Farmers Market's opening day and our first Earth Day celebra-

tion, I noticed more than a few similarities: both were busy social scenes where people met friends by chance, discussed community issues, and enjoyed the outdoor event's morning rays and fresh air; both were a forum for activists and community members; and both stressed the importance of buying local, organically grown food. Fitting, as our local food producers and incredibly successful farmers markets are possibly the greatest environmental assets the Comox Valley has as a growing urban centre.

Nations around the world are rediscovering the benefits of farming in and near their cities, holding farmers markets, and creating community gardens. Social interactions happen 10 times more often in farmers markets than they do in supermarkets, and they almost always become a forum for activists and community leaders. Studies have tied community gardens with better neighborhood attitudes, reduced littering, and maintenance of private and public spaces.

Community gardens also promote more planting in backyards, along roads, and on rooftops, leading to enormous environmental benefits for the city. Vegetation helps alleviate many of the concrete jungles' common problems, such as heat island effects and storm water runoff, and rooftop gardens can significantly reduce a building's heating and cooling costs.

Clearly, our urban centers' strong ties to local farms and gardening communities is an asset we must preserve as Comox Valley grows, but citizen activism in a city requires a lot more than preservation and resistance. In a city, citizens must actively create their habitat before somebody else does.

Ursula Franklin, a physicist, feminist, and life-long citizen activist in Toronto, once observed that a city is seen in two ways – as a habitat and as a resource. As a habitat it's where residents live, work, socialize, create, and build communities. As a resource it's a place where economic enterprises come to take advantage of a large and dense customer base; to mine their income, tax dollars, land and labour. Each interest

has a profoundly different influence on the planning and building of the city. Clearly, Comox Valley's town councils strongly favour building a city that benefits miners of the resource.

Resistance isn't enough. Comox Valley is growing; Like it or not, a city is being built. Not only do citizen activists need to fight for a livable habitat, they must dream, plan, research, design, debate, and initiate sustainable, convivial, just, and safe environments all by themselves. It's an overwhelmingly long process, but it starts quite simply.

I'm not in school and I'm not retired – a rare breed on Comox Valley's transit system. Almost all the passengers around me are students and seniors, traveling routes that are based around their needs and at times that are based around their schedules, just like the transit systems of so many other historically rural communities.

Our buses are, of course, simply responding to demand. In fact, Comox Valley Transit has clearly said in its 2006 forecast that the next five years of expansion will focus entirely on the needs of students and seniors, currently, the main users of their product. In a small community there's not much reason for the transit system to do otherwise. In a city, however, this is a very dangerous road to follow.

The most fundamental characteristic of a city is how people move around. Italian physicist Cesare Marchetti observed that city dwellers will travel an average of one hour per day, by whatever means of travel they have, at whatever speed it affords. Research into the last 600 years of travel patterns for cities around the world have proved such consistency in this number that the observation has been immortalized as the "Marchetti constant." The constant is used to define regions of urban areas as either walking, transit, or automobile cities, where walking cities are small and dense, such as Vancouver's pedestrian and cyclist based downtown, while automobile cities are large and spread out, such as the fuel chugging city of Atlanta.

Whether urban development leads to a walking, transit, or an automobile city depends strongly on initiatives taken in the first stages of its growth. In North America, we generally respond to car congestion by building more roads rather than investing in transit. While congestion slows down our underfunded buses, causing less usership, our cities sprawl outward to accommodate the cars and freeways, creating more and more dependency on automobiles to travel from home to work. It's a vicious cycle that leads to giant heat islands, complete dependency on fossil fuels, alienated communities and cultureless cities.

Car dependency also makes sustainable development incredibly difficult simply because of the mass amounts of financially, environmentally, and socially valuable land cars occupy. While bus lanes, light rails, and heavy rail systems move 5,000-8,000, 20,000, and 50,000 people per hour respectively, freeways move a mere 2,500 people per hour. Even more concerning, it's estimated that a car dependent city must provide between 5 and 8 parking spaces for every automobile its residents own.

If Comox Valley Transit continues letting its current users (students, seniors, and almost nobody from the Valley's work force) determine the future of the most fundamental aspect of our urban development, we can almost certainly count on a valley filled with roads, parking spaces, fossil fuel emissions, and absent of the density and attractiveness that makes for sustainable and culturally vibrant communities.

Greening transportation is the valley's first step to building a sustainable, livable habitat. This means making transit, walking, and cycling faster and more convenient than driving to and around our urban centers. It also means reducing the need to travel in the first place through land use that brings residents, places of work, entertainment centres, and government services (such as hospitals) closer together.

In smaller urban regions like the Comox Valley, the cheapest and easiest way to initiate this process is

with a Bus Rapid Transit system (BRT). This involves frequent buses (every 15 minutes) with their own lanes in urban centres (so they are faster than cars) along with other attributes, such as pre-paid bus passes and easy-access terminals, making the transit more competitive than automobiles.

A BRT would create the necessary framework for Transit Oriented Development (TOD), now a common form of city planning for cities that want to build diverse, stable, sustainable, culturally-rich and pedestrian-based communities.

TOD's are mixed-use and high-density areas built around the main transit nodes (such as the Courtenay Museum). In a transit dependent city, people will cram in around these areas to take advantage of the convenience of the transit system. Small businesses soon follow to take advantage of the many customers, and the areas become vibrant centres for entertainment, shopping, working and living without the noise and pollution of heavy traffic. Because every transit node connects to all the others, no one area is burdened by the entire city wanting to live or set up business there. Instead, many individual communities form around these nodes, each with its own personality and active culture.

With a BRT the Comox Valley could double its population while actually decreasing the number of roads and parking spaces currently covering its

ground. The subsequent increase in density and popularity of areas around the transit nodes (for both residents and businesses) would eliminate the need for massive big box store plazas, entertainment centres, and suburban housing that consumes the land on our forested fringes.

The fund-raising and activism required to establish a BRT and convince our town planners of the benefits of TOD's are too complex for this article, but it's enough to know that citizen activists in budding urban centres around the world have made it happen, and are more than happy to share the knowledge gained from their success.

Plans are already in the works for Comox Valley's second Earth Day celebration. When that day comes, we will officially, without a shade of doubt, live in a world of cities. There's no way to slow the migration; there's no way to stop the construction; there's no turning back. The healing or further degradation of the environment will depend entirely on how our city dwellers move, eat, breathe, and build. What on Earth can we do? My answer is as simple as Des Kennedy's: Dream. Dream up a habitat; dream up a community; dream up a city so harmoniously connected with nature, so strong with the voice of its people that urbanization, for the first time in human history, becomes the solution. 🐦