

# Report

Date **September 6, 2023** File:  
Subject **Request from CVRD Board to Consider Regional Planning Service**

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## PURPOSE

To consider a request from the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) Board for municipal input on the potential of a regional planning service.

## BACKGROUND

The CVRD Board passed the following resolution at its February 22, 2023, meeting:

***"That a letter be sent to municipal councils inviting input on the potential establishment of a regional planning service."***

A letter dated April 28, 2023, from CVRD Board Chair Aaron Stone regarding the request is included with this report (Attachment 1). A report prepared by CVRD staff on the history of regional planning in the Cowichan Valley and some considerations for establishing a regional planning service is also provided (Attachment 2).

## DISCUSSION

### Overview of Issue:

The four municipalities within the Cowichan Valley region (Municipality of North Cowichan, City of Duncan, Town of Lake Cowichan and Town of Ladysmith) each provide their own land use and community planning services and fund them from municipal revenue sources. Planning services in the unincorporated areas of the region – the CVRD's nine electoral areas - are provided by the CVRD through a community planning function funded exclusively by the nine electoral areas. Municipal CVRD Board Directors do not vote on land use decisions within the Electoral Areas, and Electoral Area Directors do not vote on Municipal land use decisions. There is currently no CVRD function for providing core land use and planning services at the regional level.

The CVRD has established functions that provide some planning services for the entire region. These include Community Health Network, Transit, Economic Development, Environmental Initiatives, Emergency Planning, Regional Parks, Social Planning, Cowichan Housing Association, Drinking and Watershed Protection. However, these functions do not coordinate land use planning at the regional level.

Despite not having a regional planning function, there have been regional-level planning initiatives undertaken by the CVRD. One example of this is the Cowichan 2050 Regional Collaboration Framework, initiated in 2018, which was intended to provide a way for local governments in the region to:

- Build more collaborative regional working relationships;
- Improve communication and information sharing;

- Support more coordinated planning on critical, region-wide issues; and,
- Establish clear and measurable progress indicators around regional livability, sustainability, and resilience.

The Cowichan 2050 Framework (see Attachment 3) includes a “call to action” that speaks to the challenges faced by the Cowichan region and the need for local governments and other regional partners to move towards a more collaborative and coordinated regional planning approach on critical Cowichan-wide issues. Cowichan 2050 nudged the CVRD towards a more regional land use and community planning approach. However, there has been little demonstrable progress made on regional land use planning without a function, resources, and a mandate to advance regional planning initiatives since that project was completed in 2019.

### **Considerations in Favour of Regional Planning Function:**

Regional planning, in concept, is easy to support. Land use issues are rarely confined within the jurisdictional boundaries of local governments, and most local planning issues (for example, housing affordability, homelessness, land use planning, transit and transportation planning, environmental protection, and climate adaptation) can be addressed more effectively at the regional level than the local level. Cooperation and collaboration at a regional level can allow for resources to be pooled and leveraged to address complex and challenging issues rather than each local government in the region attempting to do so individually. Potential benefits of regional planning are:

- Encourages decision-making based on the broader needs of the region rather than the competing interests of individual communities within it;
- Facilitates “managed growth” where growth is directed to selected locations within the region where infrastructure and communities’ amenities can be provided more efficiently;
- Better coordination of infrastructure investments to reduce costs and taxpayer burdens;
- Promotes connectivity between communities and continuity of environmental features;
- Promotes a unified voice for the region to access resources from Provincial and Federal governments better;
- Shifts focus from local issues and solutions to regional ones that can be a more effective scale for planning for resource lands, natural hazards, conservation, water management and human settlement.

### **Considerations Against a Regional Planning Function:**

While the promise of regional planning is attractive, it is also elusive. Despite some tentative steps towards proceeding with a Regional Growth Strategy (RGS) in the mid-2000s, the CVRD Board has not proceeded with an RGS or other impactful regional land use planning initiatives. The Cowichan Valley is one of the few regional districts in B.C.’s “high growth regions” that has not adopted an RGS. Attempts to do an “RGS light” for the region have not been successful. Although Cowichan 2050 attempted to promote regional-level planning, most land use planning in the region still happens at the local level, without a regional-level framework for guiding decision-making.

Perhaps the biggest impediment to regional planning, both in the Cowichan Valley and elsewhere, is a local government structure and land use administration system that prioritizes the concerns and preferences of local citizens over regional priorities. Regional planning can be divisive if there is not some level of consensus among participating jurisdictions, and trust and cooperation are generally needed to adopt and implement meaningful regional land use initiatives such as an RGS. Other commonly raised concerns with regional planning initiatives and possible reasons for not supporting a regional planning function include:

- Increased administrative costs and expanded bureaucracy;
- Cumbersome and inefficient processes for amending regional plans;
- Real or perceived interference in local government jurisdiction;
- Expensive planning processes that do not get implemented due to lack of consensus;
- Diversion of municipal/local government staff and other resources to regional initiatives; and,
- Concerns that jurisdictions with larger populations will dominate regional planning processes.

### Summary and Conclusion:

Literature on regional planning consistently emphasizes the importance of strong relationships and cooperation among participants as essential to success. Work done on Cowichan 2050 was mainly about building support and consensus for regional planning between local governments and other regional partners in the Cowichan region. It is unclear if sufficient support for meaningful regional planning in the Cowichan Valley exists. Still, if there is and the CVRD Board intends to engage in regional planning, it would follow that a regional planning function is needed to deliver that service. Alternatively, if there is not strong support on CVRD for regional planning, establishing a regional planning function would likely be ineffective at advancing regional-level planning initiatives.

Council's 2019-2022 Strategic Plan identifies "work collaboratively with regional government partners, ensuring a strong relationship with the CVRD" as a strategic action. In June 2019, Council passed a resolution *"that the mayor be directed to write the CVRD urging the Board to consider initiating a Regional Growth Strategy"* (Attachment 4). Section 3.1.6 of the 2022 Official Community Plan states, *"The Municipality will work with others to (a) Advocate for the development of a regional growth management strategy that complements the growth management strategy of this OCP ..."*. Supporting a regional planning function would be consistent with Council policy and past actions favouring regional land use planning, particularly if there is support on the CVRD Board for an RGS.

The letter from Chair Stone (Attachment 1) advises that the CVRD is at an early stage of exploring the potential of a regional planning function. More information about the service, deliverables that could be expected, and how it would be funded is recommended before any firm commitment of support is provided. Given Council's past support for regional planning and an RGS, "in principle" support for a regional planning function is recommended. Linking support for the function to an RGS is also recommended to convey that Council's support for the function is conditional on CVRD Board support for a regional land use planning framework / regional growth strategy.

## OPTIONS

1. **(Recommended Option)** THAT Council, in principle, supports the potential establishment of a regional planning function, provided the function's primary purpose is to develop, implement and administer a regional growth strategy for the Cowichan region.
2. **(Alternate Option)** THAT Council, in principle, supports the potential establishment of a regional planning function to facilitate regional planning initiatives in the Cowichan region.
3. **(Alternate Option)** THAT Council does not support the potential establishment of a regional planning function at this time for the following reason(s):
  - *[insert reason for not supporting]*
  - *[insert reason for not supporting]*

## IMPLICATIONS

In principle, support for a regional planning function would not commit Council to supporting the service, and further information would be forthcoming before any decisions about the service are made. Linking Council's support for the service to an RGS conveys that Council supports regional planning but only supports the service if it facilitates a Cowichan RGS (Option 1).

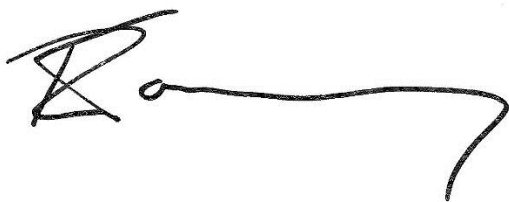
If Council is generally supportive of a regional planning function and regional planning initiatives that do not necessarily involve an RGS, Option 2 would be appropriate.

Option 3 conveys to the CVRD Board that North Cowichan Council does not support a regional planning function. Any reasons Council has for not supporting a regional planning function should be identified if Option 3 is selected.

## RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council, in principle, supports the potential establishment of a regional planning function, provided the function's primary purpose is to develop, implement and administer a regional growth strategy for the Cowichan region.

Report prepared by:



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**Approved to be forwarded to Council:**



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Attachments:

- (1) Letter from CVRD Board Chair
- (2) January 11, 2023, report to CVRD Committee of the Whole
- (3) Cowichan 2050 Backgrounder – Executive Summary
- (4) June 11, 2019, letter to CVRD Board Chair