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Implementing Regional Sustainability Strategies

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## *17. Implementing Regional Sustainability Strategies*

BY DEBORAH CURRAN

The liveability of our communities is inextricably linked to the spectacular natural environment they occupy – their forests, meadows, streams, farms and shorelines.

However, the allure of Beautiful British Columbia is bringing more and more people to our urban centres. And this makes managing urban growth a key challenge. The province’s population increases by approximately 60,000 people each year and will be home to over five million people in just a few years, 80% of whom will live in urban areas.

This is problematic because much of this growth occurs in our most ecologically sensitive and agriculturally productive valley bottoms. For example, 80% of our population – and 80% of farm gate receipts – are both found on the same two percent of our landscape, in the southwest corner of the province.

The best way to manage this growth is to take a regional perspective at

coordinating land use, transportation, environmental protection and other values that are most efficiently addressed at a regional scale. BC now provides the planning mechanism of regional growth strategies (RGS) to allow municipalities and regional districts in a region to coordinate regional approaches on important issues. Currently, 10 regional districts in BC have completed an RGS. Metro Vancouver has just adopted a new RGS titled Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping Our Future, and the Capital Regional District is converting its RGS into a regional sustainability strategy. Key aspects of all of the RGS in the province are a commitment to containing urban areas, protecting agricultural lands and sensitive ecosystems, and coordinating regional transportation.

However, the RGS legislation does not require local governments to follow any well-established planning principles. Nor does it set provincial goals for creating sustainable communities. While it sets out some guidelines, there are no specific metrics that local governments must meet and no explicit enforcement mechanisms for RGS. This offers an opportunity to retool Part 25 of the *Local Government Act* to address sustainability within the context of regional local government jurisdiction.

Recommendations for strengthening this important regional sustainability tool include:

### 1. Make regional sustainability planning mandatory

Most high growth areas have addressed coordinating growth in some way by adopting an RGS. However, there may still be areas, such as mid-Vancouver Island, where regional strategies are necessary. Where population or the growth rate reaches a specified threshold level, local government can be mandated to undertake regional sustainability planning to ensure that coordination and growth management issues are addressed before problems occur.

### 2. Establish provincial minimum requirements for regional sustainability strategies

Although the RGS legislation sets out goals, such as creating compact communities and protecting the environment, it does not mandate minimum sustainability targets that local governments must meet. These could include the percentage of a watershed that must remain in a natural state, urban containment boundaries, minimum density targets before new greenfield

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sites can be used, and greenhouse gas reduction goals through land use and attached housing forms.

### 3. Create enforcement mechanisms for regional sustainability strategies

Regional districts have no ability to enforce the requirements of the *Local Government Act* with respect to municipal implementation of the RGS. For example, regional districts have no ability to mandate that a municipality submit a regional context statement to it although municipalities have a legal obligation to do so. Likewise, if a municipality takes action not consistent with a RGS, a regional district's recourse is to challenge that decision in court. Part 25 of the *Local Government Act* needs to have explicit enforcement mechanisms and a non-litigious dispute resolution process.

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#### For more information, see:

*Sustainability in the Capital Regional District: Sustainable Systems and their Implementation through the Regional Sustainability Strategy.* Environmental Law Centre and Dogwood Initiative. (2011) [http://www.elc.uvic.ca/publications/documents/RSS\\_white-paper.pdf](http://www.elc.uvic.ca/publications/documents/RSS_white-paper.pdf)

*Green Bylaws Toolkit: for Conserving Sensitive Ecosystems and Green Infrastructure.* Environmental Law Clinic and Deborah Curran for the Wetland Stewardship Partnership, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia, Environment Canada and the Province of British Columbia. (2007) [www.greenbylaws.ca](http://www.greenbylaws.ca)