

IMAGINE

BC

Dialogues on the Future of British Columbia
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

IMAGINE ABBOTSFORD CONSENSUS REPORT

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DIALOGUE PROGRAMS, CONTINUING STUDIES
In association with the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

“Dialogue is a search for common understanding.”

“It’s nice to sit back and hear others with different backgrounds and different perspectives on the city. It adds to my perspective.”

— Gary Guthrie
Administration
City of Abbotsford

On September 22 and 23, 2006, IMAGINE BC together with the Abbotsford Community Foundation, the United Way of the Fraser Valley, and the Fraser Valley Centre for Social Enterprise convened a dialogue to consider Abbotsford’s future, 30 years from now.

At the lush, tranquil Heritage Valley Resort, 20 Abbotsford thought leaders and community animators from a range of interest groups and areas of specialization — agriculture, the environment, education, business, journalism, social action, public administration, the arts, and service organizations — took time from their busy schedules to share their stories, hopes, concerns, and visions for the Central Fraser Valley.

A continuation of the work they’ve been doing in their respective organizations, this dialogue was also a rare opportunity to speak freely as citizens whose commitment to Abbotsford transcends personal differences and private agendas. Seeking to explore different perspectives as opposed to contesting them, participants endeavoured to shed habitual roles, tap into their collective wisdom, and creatively address the complex challenges facing the valley.

“Collectively we have centuries of experience here.”

— Marilyn Hamilton
Abbotsford Community
Foundation

Abbotsford Thought Leaders

Peter Andzans
Environment, City of Abbotsford

Raj Bathe
Agriculturist

Fiona Brett
Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce / Globe
Printers

Cathy Burrell
Abbotsford Arts Council / Cavern Clothing

Stacey Corriveau
Community Futures South Fraser

Bruce Fatkin
Cedar Business Services

Gail Franklin
Fraser Valley Housing Network

Sid Gould
VisionWorks Sustainability Group

Gary Guthrie
Administration, City of Abbotsford

Marilyn Hamilton
Abbotsford Community Foundation / Integral City

Joanna Ashworth
Facilitator, Simon Fraser University

Kim Hissink
Abbotsford Spirit of BC

Glenn Hope
United Way of the Fraser Valley

Dave Kandal
Abbotsford Airport Authority

Des McKay
School District #34

Lynn Ned
Spirit Bear Centre Society, ADBA

Ralph Payne
Rotarian

Rick Rake
Abbotsford News

Marion Robinson
Fraser Basin Council

Amani Saini
Student

John Vissers
Abbotsford Land Trust

Donaleen Saul
Writer

“It is the citizen’s hat that unifies.”

Setting the context for the dialogue, IMAGINE BC’s Program Director Dr. Joanna Ashworth said that more and more communities and organizations are deliberately including a diversity of disciplines and points of view in their decision-making. Cross-sectoral participation allows for creative approaches to complex problems, and for unplanned partnerships that may open up new avenues for collaboration.

After facilitating the creation of a “container” by sharing stories, affirming a collective purpose and caring for the community, and identifying values held in common, Joanna invited participants to let go of the “hats” of their organizations as well as their positions regarding issues facing Abbotsford. Reflecting on what dialogue means to them, participants’ responses ranged from “a conversation with a centre, not with sides,” to “a giant spray can of debate-be-gone.” Joanna pointed out that, while debate can be a valuable tool when there is a need to sharpen viewpoints on an issue, dialogue provides an opportunity to listen to understand as opposed to listening to find flaws; to re-evaluate assumptions as opposed to defending them; and to demonstrate concern for others even when holding different perspectives, as opposed to making one’s position more important than the relationship. The intent is to create an open-ended, nonpartisan environment in which participants are able to speak the truth about the opportunities and difficulties that they encounter as individuals and as a community. Such an enriched conversation allows for an honest exploration of possible futures for Abbotsford, including those that are less than desirable.

Joanna spoke about the different modalities of dialogue — shared polite monologues; discussion; reflection; and “flow,” a generation of ideas and directions that could not have been anticipated. Every dialogue moves from one modality to another in a nonlinear fashion. She identified four essential roles that comprise a dialogue — mover, follower, opposer, or bystander. While most individuals in the room are leaders in their respective organizations and would tend to play a “mover” role, dialogue affords an opportunity to assume different roles at different times. Part of the art of dialogue arises from attending to the quality of the conversation and knowing which role is most advantageous at any given moment.

“Dialogue is not about reaffirming what we know, or confirming what we agree with. It’s about parking our affiliations ... Leaders of the future are those who ask good questions.”

— Dr. Joanna Ashworth
Simon Fraser University

“Our civilization, which subsumes most of its predecessors, is a great ship steaming at speed into the future. It travels faster, further, and more laden than any before. We may not be able to foresee every reef and hazard, but by reading her compass bearing and headway, by understanding her design, her safety record, and the abilities of her crew, we can, I think, plot a wise course between the narrows and the bergs looming ahead.”

—Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (2004)



“We are connected at a social and human level.”

“Abbotsford might look new but it is comprised of layers and layers of human occupation. Archaeological evidence supports people having lived here since time immemorial.”

— Marion Robinson
Fraser Basin Council

The dialogue began over an evening meal with participants sharing stories that reflected their connection to this area. Their affection for Abbotsford's lack of artifice and for its unique urban and rural blend was a recurring refrain. A student recounted the reaction of her peers at a national youth conference when she presented the organizer with a jar of raspberry jam: “Kids were staring at me. ‘We thought Abbotsford was a city. How can you grow raspberries there?’” A long-term resident involved in minor softball spoke of welcoming newcomers from bigger cities and seeing them shift from being competitive and demanding to being helpful, caring, and concerned about their child having fun as opposed to having a perfectly fitted uniform. Another spoke of getting to know people from Abbotsford's Mennonite, Sikh, and Dutch families who “taught me how to care.”

One participant spoke of having had no previous ties here, “and yet I fell in love with Abbotsford almost from the day I arrived.” For him and others, Abbotsford has been a place where they have felt invited to participate in community life in a meaningful way: attending a Chamber of Commerce meeting and feeling immediately encouraged to make an impact; or being invited to coordinate volunteers for Expo '86; or initiating a citizen-generated information roadblock to discourage car thieves.

“This year my people were invited for the first time to participate in the Mennonite Central Committee annual auction. I barbecued all day long. I felt as though we belonged.”

— Lynn Ned
Spirit Bear Centre Society
Sumas Band

Participants shared stories of pulling together as a community — the 1948 Fraser Valley flood, the record snowfall of 1996, and the 2002 action against Sumas Energy's proposed gas-fired power plant (SE2), an action that unified thousands of citizens of every walk of life in what was described by one participant as “one of the most important environmental protests BC had ever seen.”

Despite such occurrences, there were those who experienced difficulty feeling at home in Abbotsford as newcomers, particularly if they were disinclined to join a church or participate in more formal community activities. The struggle to create Abbotsford's Unity Statue brought a gathering of representatives from BC municipalities to tears, and yet one of the statue's champions experienced far less warmth at a celebratory lunch with a leader in her own city. But rather than isolate themselves, all who have felt such challenges have chosen to embrace their new home in a number of ways — creating a dinner club, developing a community guidebook, volunteering for the farmers' market, or contributing through social action. For every story of feeling excluded, there was a corresponding tale of being warmly received, as was the case with a Sumas Band member whose people were invited to participate in the annual Mennonite Central Committee auction.

“I love being able to go out and pick my own strawberries and raspberries. I love the rural/urban mix.”

— Glenn Hope
United Way of the Fraser
Valley

The range of stories would indicate that Abbotsford is not a particular place or people and cannot be easily slotted into a category. In the words of Sid Gould, VisionWorks Sustainability Group, “There are divisions. There are different communities. They are not navigable from one to the other. There is no one particular way or thing that will reach everyone. Realizing this, I came to understand that this is where I belong.”

“Changes will occur but let’s try to direct them.”

The following morning, a panel of three participants offered an overview of some of the social, environmental, and economic issues facing the region.

Gail Franklin of the Fraser Valley Housing Network offered a sobering look at the loneliness that she has witnessed among different populations in the community. Defining loneliness as the pain of having something to offer but with no one to receive it, she identified immigrants, teenagers, young mothers, seniors, and people with mental illness or disabilities, as examples of citizens lacking the networks, resources, social skills, and/or opportunities to connect with others and to participate in community life. Gail pointed to “the invisible homeless people” such as single parents or youth who lack a steady income and are living with relatives or sleeping in their cars. She spoke of skills training, informal meeting places, as well as walkability and an improved transit system, as just some of the ways to bridge “the inequities that divide us.”

Dave Kandal of the Abbotsford Airport Authority proclaimed agriculture as a vital part of Abbotsford’s economy both now and in the future. Although supportive of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), in his view the 159 acres to the north of the airport should have been excluded and targeted for airport expansion. He applauded the University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV) in its intention to obtain university status, and pointed to the new Abbotsford Hospital and Cancer Centre as a flagship for the whole of the Fraser Valley. He advocated higher density in urban areas to house the growing population, stating that, “Other people deserve the opportunity to live here. After all, we’re here.”

John Vissers of the Abbotsford Land Trust spoke of the great opportunity to develop and expand as a city without depriving future generations of Abbotsford’s considerable environmental resources. He warned participants of the risk of becoming “superficial adopters” of environmentalism while being unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices. Using terms such as “sustainable” in, for example, Abbotsford’s Official Community Plan can cause people to think that environmental imperatives have been addressed when in fact “many of our practices are not sustainable.” He expressed concern about Abbotsford’s rapid growth and its potential incursion on natural habitats, sharing his vision of the “green ocean” of Sumas Mountain as an enduring presence for generations to come.

Inspired by John’s image of the green ocean and by Dave’s confidence in the strength of the agricultural sector, participants were nonetheless shaken by Gail Franklin’s depiction of a community beset by inequities. Although the dialogue was intended to focus primarily on the economy and ecology, social issues became an important area of concern in the group discussions that followed.

“I’m surprised to hear about the loneliness in this community. I guess it is difficult to break in. It saddens me to hear this.”

—Rick Rake
Abbotsford News

“I have been trying to move people from apathy to curiosity and have had a hard time of it. But I can’t leave, I have to keep at it.”

— Stacey Corriveau
Community Futures South Fraser

“Yes, we continue to grow at an alarming rate, but like a 6’5” awkward teenager, we seem to be in a perpetual state of becoming. But what? We don’t seem to know.”

— John Vissers
Abbotsford Land Trust

**“I believe in
Abbotsford ...
It’s going to be
my children’s and
grandchildren’s
future.”**

— Kim Hissink
Abbotsford Spirit of BC

**“When I project
Abbotsford 30 years
down the road, I
don’t want to see a
derelict downtown
area that people avoid.
I want to be able to
walk through my city,
and not inhale gas
fumes. I want my city
to be built around
people, regardless of
background, culture,
or belief system. I
want everyone to feel
that they can make
a contribution, that
they can know their
neighbours ... I want
to see a community
that cares about its
youth, and that caring
is demonstrated in
real interactions with
young people.”**

— Des McKay
School District #34

“Dialogue is a very good way to test our own assumptions.”

Rotating through a series of small groups world café style, participants turned their attention toward the following questions:

- What do you imagine for Abbotsford’s future?**
- What are your biggest hopes and fears for the future?**
- What potential shocks do you think Abbotsford should prepare for?**
- What examples can you identify as signs of progress?**

“There are still some things we can do.”

Hopes for Abbotsford’s future encapsulated a series of broad themes, each with attendant features:

A healthy environment

- putting the environment first, stepping up our environmental efforts, shifting the focus to future generations
- making sustainability part of the school curriculum
- ensuring growth addresses ecological needs, which means being selective about types of industrial growth
- more densification, multi-use buildings, as opposed to sprawl; stay with current land use
- more intelligent use of farmland
- smaller homes the norm, as opposed to “McMansions”
- businesses focusing on sustaining people and the environment, not just the bottom line

A diverse, thriving economy

- creating our own industry and infrastructure to provide jobs
- thriving agriculture, providing food for our own residents
- thriving airport, hospital, and university

A community built around people

- a sense of community that is not dependent on an external threat or crisis
- livable communities that appeal to the aesthetic aspect of being human and that call forth people’s creativity
- less social fragmentation and racial segregation
- integrating the secular across belief systems

- more intergenerational respect
- treating youth as an asset and providing more opportunities for them to participate in a real way
- walkable streets, sidewalk patios, coffee shops, etc. where people feel safe talking to strangers
- a community culture that allows for spontaneous, informal public gatherings and is accepting of “misfits”
- reduced drug use and crime rate
- a university that is part of the community
- community-wide embrace of the marginalized
- enthusiastic acceptance of “new blood,” new ideas, especially from youth
- more housing, including affordable, low-cost social housing, that is close to amenities and services
- reduced hospital wait lists
- places for cancer patients to relax

A unique identity

- readily distinguishable from “cookie cutter” communities
- Abbotsford is an attractive city in the Fraser Valley Regional District that builds on its own distinct qualities, as opposed to being an appendage of the GVRD
- historic downtown Abbotsford that feels historic and reflects local history
- an intentionally designed community that embraces Abbotsford’s cultural diversity and the arts
- museums and art centres
- an art gallery named after a person, not a corporation

“We aren’t able to deal with our social issues now. How will we be able to do so as our community expands?”

Participants’ fears about Abbotsford’s future largely arose from concerns about an insufficient environmental focus and an inability to intelligently manage the city’s growth. Fears fell into three categories — environmental, economic, and social.

Environmental Decline

- increased air and noise pollution arising from a number of sources, particularly car exhaust (and, to a lesser extent, airport expansion)
- pollution of soil and watershed due to federal, provincial, GVRD, and FVRD lack of regulation of animal waste

Economic Decline

- loss of agricultural capacity due to higher production costs and labour shortages
- increased competition from world market (i.e., China) on local agriculture
- lack of skilled labour to support and sustain local industry

Social Decline

- young people are not remaining in the community after graduating from high school (population predominantly young families and retirees)
- putting too much focus on the vulnerable could create more dependency
- top-down solutions that don’t take into account those most affected by these solutions
- fears about safety leading to a “hunkering down” mentality (e.g., gated communities)
- drugs and violence have the potential to harm our youth, and to destroy our sense of community and citizen safety
- impact of the community’s high number of fetal alcohol and drug-affected children (also has economic impact)

“The human footprint in Abbotsford exceeds the environment’s capacity to carry us. We currently use up an equivalent of 2.5 acres per person in resources and space.”

— Marion Robinson
Fraser Basin Council

“I’m concerned that Abbotsford may not be able to compete agriculturally on a global level.”

— Raj Bathe
Agriculturist

“I know a number of people who have left this area in the last ten years and have gone to the Okanagan and the Interior. There has been an exodus and I’m concerned about it.”

— Ralph Payne
Rotarian

“Areas that were forested five years ago, now they’re all houses.”

— Amani Saini
Student

“Homelessness is a result of wealth. When wealth is so predominant, homes are no longer affordable.”

— Marilyn Hamilton
Abbotsford Community Foundation

“You won’t retain 25 year olds with daffodils.”

— Ralph Payne
Rotarian

POTENTIAL SHOCKS

Participants identified a number of potential shocks that could have a profound impact on Abbotsford's future. Some, such as loss of agriculture, and substance abuse and violence among youth, have already been mentioned. Other shocks that were mentioned included:

- global warming
- water shortage
- peak oil
- avian flu epidemic
- economic downturn

LEARNING BY EXAMPLE

Participants named other centres that could serve as either models or cautionary tales for Abbotsford.

St. John, New Brunswick. With only a fraction of Abbotsford's wealth and half of its population, this city has a well-developed, high-density downtown core that offers a high quality of life for its residents, regardless of income. Historic industrial buildings have been turned into shops and museums, and amenities have been arranged in such a way that people can shop at the farmers' market, go for a swim, and visit a pub, all within walking distance of one another.

Both **Whistler** and Vancouver's **Yaletown** were also mentioned as models of intelligent high-density urban design.

Quebec City was proclaimed as a city that offers quality cultural activities and entertainment for its residents, at little or no cost.

The water shortage that **Tofino** faced in the summer of 2006 could easily occur in Abbotsford.

The gridlock that is the dominant feature of California's **Silicon Valley**, once a bucolic community, was cited as what could happen to Abbotsford if transportation issues aren't adequately addressed.

Dateline Abbotsford 2036

The participants formed groups to prepare newscasts depicting three possible futures for Abbotsford: the darkest possible scenario, the status quo 30 years from now, and the ideal future.

Dark Days Ahead

Abbotsford is beset by environmental disasters including an earthquake and a massive flood resulting from climate change. Avian flu has long since wiped out the poultry industry and is running rampant throughout the human population. Other pandemics seem inevitable. High fuel costs and the resulting downturn in agriculture and other industries such as transportation have virtually destroyed the economy. Despite the unavailability of employment or housing, there continues to be a steady stream of residents moving to Abbotsford because of Vancouver's high housing costs. This is particularly difficult since the city can no longer cope with the staggering numbers of homeless people who have migrated to Abbotsford in the wake of 2010 gentrification. The resulting social disorder and astronomical crime rate has made Abbotsford vulnerable to ongoing terrorist attacks.

Status Quo Promises Bleak Future

Concerned about the community's inability to cope with widespread substance abuse and violence among youth, Mayor Amani Saini announces that Abbotsford should have paid more attention to the 2006 youth drug strategy. Councillor Leika Vissers laments the loss of the green ocean envisaged by her father that same year. Many residents and businesses are upset because their water fees have now doubled. Highway gridlock has become so severe that even-numbered and odd-numbered cars have been assigned alternate days for travel. To respond to the transportation crisis, the Department of Highways released plans to twin the McCallum overpass. Health officials have just completed a study indicating that deaths resulting from asthma have tripled in the past year. Due to a lack of public support for the arts in Abbotsford, there has been a migration of artists and performers to Mission, now reputed to be "the city of festivals." In the wake of the Abbotsford Blueberry Council's mass resignation because of abandoned crop fields, the Ministry of Agriculture has given its stamp of approval for a new crop, BC Bud.

Abbotsford Leads the Way

The City of Abbotsford is proud of its 100% employment rate and the absence of homelessness and poverty among its citizens. The strength of the local agriculture sector is such that Abbotsford is not only able to provide food for the local community but for the whole region. Bad air quality warnings are a thing of the past and have been for over 25 years. Roadways are now dominated by electric and hybrid cars whose numbers are only exceeded by pedestrian volumes on South Fraser Way. Transportation services will also be improved by the expansion of the SkyTrain and the West Coast Express to include all Lower Mainland communities, and by the thriving Abbotsford International Airport, which has just welcomed its millionth international passenger. The University of the Fraser Valley and the Abbotsford Collegiate Centre have just announced the opening of a state of the art teaching facility, the fifth building on the university's beautiful, world-class campus.

"Holding to current policy decisions, we can't make progress. The dark future seems the more realistic."

— John Vissers
Abbotsford Land Trust

"If that is what we envision, that's just plain hopelessness."

— Dave Kandal
Abbotsford Airport Authority

“Signs of progress? We came up with a lot of them.”

“The government can neither legislate nor accumulate the necessary resources to solve environmental problems. They need to be addressed through community governance as opposed to government.”

—Peter Andzans
Environment, City of
Abbotsford

In small groups and in the final plenary session, participants came up with a number of indicators that offer reason for optimism about Abbotsford's future. They have been organized under three headings — environmental, economic and social — but because these categories are interrelated, many indicators fall into more than one category.

Environmental

- developers are beginning to take into account environmental issues — e.g., the Sumas Mountain development
- Abbotsford City Council has just hired a second biologist
- industry and agricultural stewardship groups are taking responsibility for their environmental impacts — e.g., Auto Recyclers and the Sustainable Poultry Farming Group
- the high level of community involvement in the SE2 protest indicates a willingness to take responsibility for the Lower Fraser Valley airshed
- BC Hydro's Stave Lake Power Plan includes social, economic, and environmental considerations

Economic

- completion of Mt. Lehman interchange
- Abbotsford Regional Hospital and Cancer Centre underway
- emerging agritourism industry (e.g., Circle Farm Tour), as well as local culinary tourism
- airport expansion

Social

- Abbotsford's Official Community Plan, which engaged the community, indicates a readiness to plan more intentionally
- more public willingness to deal with social issues (e.g., Compassion Park sparked an unprecedented degree of public concern)
- recently formed Vibrant Abbotsford Committee committed to reducing poverty in this community
- Abbotsford now has an arts policy and an arts and heritage coordinator, and plans for an arts centre “are at least on the table”
- developers are beginning to take into account social issues — e.g., density bonusing for low-cost housing
- Abbotsford City Council has a social planner on staff
- Fraser Valley Housing Group, dedicated to providing affordable housing, consists of representatives across sectors, including developers and environmentalists
- “tribes” are beginning to connect with one another — e.g., Sto:lo people being part of a local high school graduation ceremony
- UCFV is going for university status

“It isn’t about fixing things in one session.”

Participants concluded the dialogue by reflecting on themes, insights, and questions that could move the process forward in future conversations.

There was a general agreement about using “a green ocean” as both a symbol and a standard for sustaining Abbotsford’s beauty and relatively healthy environment. Upholding Abbotsford’s agricultural industry was also held as essential.

There were some distinct areas of disagreement, primarily concerning whether or not to limit growth in this area. Those in favour of continued growth felt strongly that Abbotsford cannot and should not restrict people from living here, and that social and environmental concerns could still be taken into account. Those opposed felt equally strongly that unrestricted growth will not be sustainable environmentally, socially, or economically. One delegate expressed concern that we have become addicted to the economics of rapid growth, and that maturing as a community means that the emphasis will need to shift from quantity to quality. Those concerned about unlimited growth felt that **Dark Days Ahead** would be the likely outcome if Abbotsford’s expansion continues on its current trajectory.

What level of growth is sustainable for Abbotsford? is a useful question for future dialogues.

A number of participants expressed concern about social inequities and the need to bring them more to the forefront of public policy and discourse. However there was a division of opinion regarding the extent of social responsibility and how it can be most effectively expressed.

How far does our sense of social responsibility go and how do we support the vulnerable populations in our community? is another question to consider in the future.

More than one participant expressed frustration at the slowness with which social change is instituted in this community, and a number of others expressed concern about moving beyond talk to action.

How do we move from contemplation into action? was posed at this dialogue and will be an important question to spark further conversation.

“It’s not that there’s an unwillingness to work toward a positive future, but why are the people in charge unwilling to move it along? Why does it take years and years and years?”

— Cathy Burrell
Abbotsford Arts Council

“We need to keep nurturing this seed that will eventually bear fruit.”

— Bruce Fatkin
Cedar Business Services

“I want to work more strongly toward more community engagement.”

— Fiona Brett
Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce

“We’ve taken a first step here.”

In keeping with the IMAGINE BC model, this dialogue, with its theme of visioning the relationship between economy and ecology, is the first of many conversations on Abbotsford’s future. The intent is to co-create a safe, open, and diverse forum for ongoing dialogue that reaches across all sectors of the community.

IMAGINE BC is a series of annual dialogues presented by Simon Fraser University's Dialogue Programs, Continuing Studies that has set out to change the way British Columbians think and talk about the future of their province.

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