

# *Imagine Abbotsford*

Policy Makers Dialogue

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Prepared by  
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on behalf of the  
Imagine Abbotsford  
Steering Committee

On March 7th, 2008, Imagine Abbotsford convened a policy makers' dialogue to consider Abbotsford's future thirty years from now, through the lens of culture and learning. Participation in this dialogue was by invitation, and included representatives from the political sphere, civic management, the school board, business interests, religious groups, community activism and non-profits. Twenty-eight policy makers attended this event, which was held at the University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV), Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies.

The purpose of the policy makers' dialogue was to discuss and reflect upon the content of the Imagine Abbotsford Consensus Report and the Imagine Abbotsford Session 2: Public Dialogue Report. These reports document Imagine Abbotsford's initial Thought Leaders' Dialogue (September 2007) and the Public Dialogue (January 2008).

Facilitated by Dr. Joanna Ashworth from Simon Fraser University and Imagine BC, the policy makers' session began with a recap of conversations from the Thought Leaders' Dialogue and the Public Dialogue.

Don Chapman, recently-retired head of the UCFV degree program in adult education, spoke of the transformation of education into a life-long learning process. He also spoke of the contribution that education plays in the development and reflection of culture. He challenged attendees to think of education and culture in terms of an investment that pays future dividends.

Lee Murray, from the Abbotsford Arts Council and Downtown Business Association expressed the importance of the arts as the language of culture. Summarizing key elements from prior dialogues, he spoke of the need to create an infrastructure consisting of galleries, performance halls and venues that showcase the arts in Abbotsford.

Marion Robinson of the Fraser Basin Council revisited the social dynamics of culture – how the “rules and assumptions about our protocols, manners, seniors, youth, shopping, engineering all exist because they don't need to be explicitly explained as they come up.” In this sense, “culture” reflects our health in general, as well as our attachments and our expressions of shared feelings and understandings.

Baljit Dhaliwal, a teacher working on a dissertation on cultural intelligence, painted an image of a social collage. It is comprised of the unique visual images that individuals contribute, all melded together under a collective unifying theme. The notion that Imagine Abbotsford is a chance to celebrate our potential and plan for probable challenges resonated strongly with Baljit during the first two dialogues.

## What is the future we all would like to see?

After reviewing elements of this year's first two dialogues, participants were asked to share their visions of Abbotsford's future. Several themes emerged from the dialogue that struck a chord with many of the participants.

These themes include:

### Facilities

How do we use the facilities that we currently have to their full potential?

### Cultural Accessibility

How do we improve the accessibility of arts and culture in our community?

### Transportation

What is the relationship between transportation and healthy social indicators?

### Connection

How do we develop a sense of connection in our community whereby the physical and social needs of all residents are addressed?

## Facilities

*"We can do much with what we have."*

In the public dialogue held in January, the idea of converting closed schools into community centres was articulated as a means of addressing the need for more community facilities in Abbotsford. During the policy makers' dialogue, this idea became a point of departure for a discussion on how to use civic facilities such as school buildings to their best potential. As John Smith stated,

**"Collaborative partnerships work better when it comes to effective use of public property. For example, all members of School Board 34 recently met with Council and City staff and determined that we can do a better job making the 50 school buildings available to the public when they are not being used for education. We can do much with what we have."**

Joanne Field shared with the group the changes that have taken place within Abbotsford's educational system.

**“We recognize that the whole mandate of school boards is broadening. Philip Sheffield School is now a learning centre and the head of the Abbotsford Virtual School community. Abbotsford Middle School has been opened as a community school. We can work and partner with groups. There are greater opportunities to make these partnerships.”**

Responding to this, one participant related his frustration with the bureaucratic process of working through the schools, citing the challenges of not being able to book rooms until after September and the difficulty this poses to planning.

Another source of facilities that could be more fully utilized is the large number of churches in our community. As Michael Kerry of the Abbotsford Christian Leaders Network stated,

**“The church at large is a wonderful, powerful resource that isn’t very efficiently harnessed. We have a large number of good buildings and interested congregations. If that community could be more effectively engaged it could do more.”**

John van Dongen also spoke to the better use of facilities:

**“On the issue of use of facilities such as space, I think there’s a real receptivity in the provincial government to these ideas. It’s a case of credible people getting together to identify the need, and working with others to plan for multiple uses.”**

In short, there is a great potential to use more effectively the facilities that Abbotsford already has.

## Cultural Accessibility

*“How do we make the public aware of the assets they already own?”*

One of the challenges facing Abbotsford’s arts and cultural community is the dissemination of information about the events and opportunities that already take place. The question of how to connect people to programs was perceived to be vital, and it revealed room for improvement. As Cindy Schafer stated, “a lot of really great programs available to the community are not widely known.”

There is an opportunity in Abbotsford to create a centralized source of arts and cultural information. Joanne Field used the example of Bellingham’s Entertainment News to illustrate a possibility for Abbotsford:

**“I think of Bellingham compared with Abbotsford. I can walk into that small city and immediately know what’s happening. Their Entertainment News is colourful and informative, and it’s everywhere. You can find out anything and everything—cultural, church, everything.”**

Don Chapman lamented the lack of a central medium as a tool of accessibility and information:

**“Abbotsford is like a mouse beside Vancouver, especially in terms of the media. In the prairies this town would have a TV station, a radio station, etc., that would be central. There should be an identifiable electronic medium for Abbotsford.”**

It was suggested that UCFV’s student radio station could be expanded to become a community-based radio station rather than a commercial one.

Andrea Senft, of the Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee, related the committee’s success with the launch of a community guide that provides information on programs and services for families with young children (ages 0 to 12.) According to Senft, the number of children registered in programs has increased as a result of providing accessible public information.

In addition to the challenge of disseminating program information in our community, the issue of cost was discussed. Comparing Abbotsford to Mission, Marion Robinson explained the benefits of having accessible programs.

**“I heard a compliment: ‘Mission is a good town to be poor in.’ That is, in Mission you can figure out the implicit and explicit knowledge that makes life sustainable even when you don’t have much money. In Abbotsford can we find these good things if we don’t have much money?”**

Vince Dimanno eloquently stated his case for carefully considering the cost to access arts and culture:

**“It seems that we attach a cost to access. Inclusion in arts and cultural education is a birthright that should be freely shared in the community, and has been historically in other places. In the Sikh culture this is so; in the North American culture we put it in a building and charge people for access to it. When we make these visions for the future, we need to use an inclusive thought process – to include everyone; the homeless, seniors and so on.”**

More comparisons were made between Mission and Abbotsford in terms of Mission’s higher level of citizen participation in community events. Some policy makers perceived Mission to be more successful in having people participate in events such as the Celebration of Community. There is a concern that events in Abbotsford always risk limited attendance.

In general, it was felt that there was a need for more festivals like the Berry Beat Festival, which includes the public without barriers such as cost.

## Policy Makers' Wish List

The following list is a collection of the elements that participants in this dialogue said they would like to see in Abbotsford.

### History and Culture

- The preservation of our agricultural lands.
- 10,000 years of history recognized in the trails project.

### Infrastructure

- Improved access to public buildings such as schools to use for arts and cultural events.
- Operation of the farmers' market all year round.
- Better use of electronic mediums such as Facebook to engage young people in a vision of our community.
- Improved scheduling of the West Coast Express to include more flexible commute times and Saturday service.
- Destination shopping with cafes, street seating and public spaces for "just hanging out."
- Improved public transportation.

### Media and Events

- More newspaper reporting of events in Abbotsford.
- More community events, such as outdoor movies projected onto the side of a building as is done in Bellingham.
- Museum and art gallery exhibitions that appeal to a broad range of citizens, such as Surrey's recent exhibit on tattoos.
- Children's art projects that reflect their vision of Abbotsford's future.
- More free public events.

## Transportation

*"Who would have anticipated a conversation about culture and learning that explored and included transportation?"*

The connection between our cars and the social consequences of our transportation choices emerged as a theme during the dialogic process. The discussion stemmed from one participant's comment that the car is one of the most isolating devices we've ever created. Another participant agreed and further illustrated the point:

**"The process of driving home, driving into your carport and shutting the door is isolating us. We need to have conversations that will help us come together. The change toward isolation in recent years has been phenomenal. The process of conversation with your neighbours builds community."**

John Vissers, a local environmentalist, lamented the lack of transportation options in Abbotsford and the effects that this could have on our culture:

**"Abbotsford has the lowest per capita public transportation use in BC, possibly in Canada. There are reasons for that, but we know that our sustainable future – culture, religious life – is utterly dependent on alternatives to cars. We all want a future that's sustainable, but we're not noticeably moving toward it in our policy decisions."**

Gail Franklin suggested that given the rising price of oil, there are economic as well as social pressures for walkability.

*“Agriculture defines culture. If you don’t have food, you don’t have culture. We have one of the prime agricultural regions in the world. Let’s preserve our food land.”*

John Smith reminded the group of the new Trails project – a 35 km trail from west to east connecting other trails and making it possible for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy nature. The strong public /private partnership for this project noted and appreciated, as well as the strong commitment from Abbotsford’s corporate sector and Abbotsford Community Foundation. The project’s cultural benefits were also discussed, including the historical features of the trail which will be marked with plaques and standards.

Finally, Karen Evans pointed out that the lack of public transportation affects the access of many (especially youth) to cultural programs. If both parents are working (and are unable to drive their children to programs,) then youth are not able to fully participate in community life for simple lack of transportation.

## Connection

*“I noticed that we (as a culture) are talking about ‘doing more’ rather than connecting more and doing what we do in a wiser way.”*

In a very short time Abbotsford has grown from a small town to the fifth largest city in BC. This poses some interesting challenges for policy makers. The notion of “connection”, and how it relates to the way we structure our community and interact with each other, was a recurring theme throughout the dialogue.

Ron Van Wyk imagined a future for Abbotsford in which issues of social justice were addressed.

**“When asked, thirty years out what would I like Abbotsford to look like, I think it would be a place where we don’t have to deal with young people who have to sell their bodies to find a place to live, or have mentally diagnosed people living on the streets. Where recent immigrants find opportunities to develop their cultural capital and make headway in this community.”**

Likewise, Lucie Honey-Ray stressed the important role of neighbourhoods in developing connections that not only react to address specific issues like crime prevention, but exist as social networks that provide people with a sense of belonging.

Bill Beatty spoke of his future vision of Abbotsford as entailing all of Abbotsford’s cultures working together in harmony – connecting, planning and communicating in participatory decision making. He cited the farmers’ markets of Waterloo in Southern Ontario as an example of a marvelous enterprise network interlinked with social and environmental interests.

On the issue of ‘connection,’ John van Dongen spoke of a lesson learned from the city’s experience of homelessness at Compassion Park: policy makers need to get out of their offices and talk to the people who need help.

As Marilyn Hamilton, of the Abbotsford Community Foundation, acknowledged,

**“If we are to be a ‘city in the country’ that models a successful urban environment in a successful agricultural environment...the process of getting there involves connectivity.”**

## What is the Role of Dialogue?

*“This dialogue is one of the earliest attempts of an incredibly fast-growing community to exhale for a moment and ask ourselves where we’re going.”*

Taking stock of who we are, how we are growing as a community and what we would like our city to be in the future requires introspection and community dialogue. Many participants appreciated the opportunity of bringing civility into conversations about Abbotsford’s future. Mike de Jong articulated the importance of coming together to think and discuss as a group what we want to be. He said,

**“The risk when you’re in the implementation business is that you get overwhelmed by the past and by time constraints. As a society we’ve moved forward so quickly. The value of what this group is doing is to enable us as a societal group to think about what we want to be. Cultures elsewhere present themselves as deeply rooted, but not by accident. It has taken place as a result of a collective will of leaders.”**

Likewise, Herb Thiessen from Community Futures South Fraser considered the benefits of exploring dialogue instead of focusing on prescriptive quick fixes in our community.

*“There are moments in a community when people are asked about their vision. To give people an opportunity to be informed in a non-partisan way about what their opportunities are, and what their choices might be—this is crucial.”*

**“As someone involved in implementing policy, I need to prevent myself from becoming too prescriptive and going for the quick fix. I appreciate the Imagine Dialogues because we need to enable this community to emerge and come to their own conclusions.”**

In community dialogues, “the process is the product” – in other words, dialogue in and of itself is of value for its ability to produce a rich and complex picture of the social realities that affect quality of life now and in the future. Without talking about where we are today, it is impossible to understand what we would like to be in thirty years and beyond.

What many participants of the policy makers’ dialogue took away with them was a sense that we have boundless opportunities to control our collective destiny. Through dialogue we are better able to appreciate the social-economic dynamics that are the framework of our community. As Bill Beatty stated,

**“Our opportunity is our growth, our history, and the chance for us to define our neighbourhoods based on the past. We have a very rich story, and we can continue to tell it and grow.”**

## Participants

Donna Alary  
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## Acknowledgements

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### Imagine Abbotsford's Partners

Abbotsford Community Foundation  
BC Healthy Communities  
Fraser Valley Centre for Social Enterprise  
United Way of the Fraser Valley

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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.

The intent is to co-create a safe, open, and diverse forum for ongoing dialogue that reaches across all sectors of the community.

Supported by Imagine BC, Imagine Abbotsford is an annual cycle of dialogues on Abbotsford's future. In 2007-8 its theme is culture and learning in the community.

Imagine BC is an initiative of Simon Fraser University, North Growth Management Ltd., the Province of British Columbia, Western Economic Diversification, and the Vancouver Foundation.

For more information visit [www.sfu.ca/dialogue/imaginebc](http://www.sfu.ca/dialogue/imaginebc).