

## Councillor's Column

It was spring of 2010 when the Community Foundation raised alarm about the diminishing presence and prosperity of young adults on the Coast. I was pulled in as school board chair: over 12 years we had lost a third of our enrolment (1,300 students) due to a sharp decline in the number of families on the Coast. Many of our families were struggling financially, and still are. Mill layoffs and rising housing costs have not helped.

I ended up, literally, writing a master's thesis on the problem and how our community was working together to solve it. One of my recommendations supported a long-overdue Coast-wide economic development effort, to rebuild employment. I then witnessed the effort crash twice, largely due to discomfort from local politicians in a model that would be Coast-wide and arm's-length from government control.

My main interest in running for Gibsons Council in 2014 was to finally achieve Coast-wide economic development. I was fortunate to be elected with a Council that supported this vision, and a neighbouring Council that wanted to move to broaden its approach from a Sechelt-only one. At the SCRD board we've also had full buy-in, led by Chair Garry Nohr's long-time advocacy and a workshopping process with the Island Coastal Economic Trust launched by the last SCRD board in 2014.

All these local governments, in a vital partnership with the shíshálh Nation, have now officially and financially supported a Coast-wide economic development board starting in 2016. This new board met for the first time on April 28—it bridges demographics, communities and business sectors. It may be coming together in the wake of mill layoffs, but due to the Community Foundation's visionary work five years ago, the Sunshine Coast is at least no longer being regarded as a retirement community.

Tourism is thriving, and will even more with the approval of the hotel tax to better promote of the Coast's incredible attributes. The booming housing market is creating affordability issues, but is solving some for families that can't afford the Lower Mainland—and see the Sunshine Coast as an ideal commute or work-from-home opportunity, and an unmatched environment to raise children. Local businesses have materialized that were unimaginable a decade ago, such as Persephone Brewery, Sunshine Coast Olive Oil, the Coast Car Co-op, Coast Gravity Park, the FUSE co-working space, La Petite Souris Chocolate, Pacific Ferries and relocated from Vancouver, the venerable Douglas & McIntyre Publishing. We even have an extremely active and growing Tech Hub.

I had a recent chance to return to the school board office, this time as a councillor advocating for sports fields. Some budget data was also on the agenda—confirming the exciting fact that school enrolment is increasing for the first time in 17 years! So things are looking up: the outstanding individuals on our new, long-awaited Coast-wide economic development board have a lot to work with, and an opportunity to guide this momentum into an exciting and sustainable revitalized community.