

Why a STEP ONE Workshop!

How do we best manage change? When opportunities arise to do new things or at least different things that require governmental assistance, what is the best way to get to solution? And how do we know we've started down the better path?

Fifty years ago water was a real issue in the Okanagan. There was neither real focus nor a strategic plan to get from here to there. Local, regional, provincial and federal politicians had ideas. But no one had a valid vision to address the problem. The water study was requiring key community focus and the public needed to be actively involved in this planning exercise.

Formal public involvement (PIP) in that study ensured the recommendations were valuable in the short-term and applicable in a longer time-frame. The momentum generated in the PIP process continued going forward thus enabling implementation of the recommendations based upon a good understanding of the desires of a dynamic cross-section of the community. Politicians were then enabled at all levels to become drivers of new legislation, new budgeting allocations, new planning priorities and new facilities.

A challenge has emerged again related to the vision for the Arts in the South Okanagan/Similkameen. The Arts require political support if they are to flourish. It is a fact the arts reflect the state of government and democracy, and it is a political process that has always led to the proliferation of the arts.

The model by which the present political system operates is largely the same as it has been for well over a century. However, the growth in population and social systems has created problems with governmental communication processes. Consequently, a political system which functioned fairly effectively in a slow moving society now needs focussed assistance in order to respond. Planning, often a long range luxury, has become a vital necessity just to maintain control on intermediate and even short range problems and challenges.

Who then can influence change?

For change effectively to occur, the pace of life today requires a political structure as relevant to today's society as earlier frameworks were to their eras. Input from the citizenry regarding future planning has become essential to the process. If the community does not maintain a continuing role within planning or does not feel a sense of real identity with policy-making, the viability of the political structure can be compromised or at least called into question.

An electoral vote is really only a *yes* or *no* and unless the ballot specifically deals with a referendum issue, the *yes* or *no* actually indicates preference only for a political philosophy or administration. In essence, involving the public is seeking the on-going advice of the citizenry. The psychology and the practicality of such an overt activity can provide significant advances towards improving the communications between the political leadership and the public.

Between elections, attitudes, ideas, and goals can change along with the emergence of new problems or issues not visible at the time of the previous election. It is vital to the maintenance of the democratic process that the community be engaged between elections.

Public involvement must be less oriented to philosophy and more to practicality. The public service has no mandate to set cultural, social or economic goals for the community but rather is charged with developing workable solutions within established guidelines. Organized, structured input from the public can be most beneficial by helping focus goals, be they social, environmental, economic or cultural, and by presenting ideas within a logical framework which can be understood and utilized by the technical expert(s).

Engaged citizens must be educated as to the complexities of planning and implementing major societal decisions and/or projects. Therefore, any mechanism designed to improve the public's input channels to the planning process should also contain provisions to improve the channels of education within the community.

Success of the process should not be evaluated so much in the number of people involved as in the degree to which those who are involved represent a wide cross-section of the community: representation from all *interest* areas should be sought, in order to prevent any *stacking of the deck*. Levelling the playing field should ensure that no one area need feel it is a minority.

In the final analysis, it is the citizen as taxpayer and/or consumer who finances the surrounding cultural, social and economic structures. Therefore, it is incumbent on all involved in planning to make sure the public is properly involved in any and all planning processes from the outset. *The citizen must be considered an informed shareholder!*

Public input into the evolution of our society and the forward planning in relation to *the arts* are essential. Today our society is in danger of losing much of what it has achieved because of increasing ambivalence. This has occurred several times in history and as recently as the Taliban & ISIS destroying historically significant artifacts and sites.

With restricted budgets and limited facilities many artistic events are no longer possible. At the same time, immigration to the area has introduced the opportunity to experience new and different artistic expressions but it is confined to locales where each individual group congregates – church halls, social clubs, service organizations, even spacious basements. How can such interest in and support for the arts be enhanced if no one knows and there is no over-riding vision to nurture and share these expressions on a wider-ranging basis?

The time is now to re-ignite the search for a viable way to ensure *the arts component of community living* is re-examined. To do this, STEP ONE must be taken: what does a cross-section of the community actually consider the future of *the arts* to embrace? What constitutes a *vision for the arts*? Thus it is most appropriate to call out an *SOS for the Arts*. We need to determine if there is sufficient will to set forth a *vision statement* and, if so, we can move to STEP TWO – assembling the South Okanagan/Similkameen community to help define how that vision is to be actualized. If such definition is established the **SOS Arts Board** is prepared to move toward a next step, whatever that might be...