

OCP update begins in the backyard

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Community gatherings demand a lot. People are busy. They have kids to raise, meals to cook, softball games to play. Between this, that and your grandmother, who has the time to attend a town hall meeting? Especially during the summer?

The people at Resort Municipality of Whistler are well aware of this, so last year when council requested a more efficient way to collect data from the community for the updated Official Community Plan (OCP), staff settled on a rather progressive idea: why not let the community lead these discussions, in their own backyards?

The result is the Backyard Brainstorming Workbook, which provides community members the opportunity to take part in the OCP process on their own terms. The RMOW facilitates the discussions; the community leads them.

The idea is to work in groups of 10 to 12 people. People fill the first section of the workbook on their own. The group then gets together, whenever is convenient, to discuss what everyone has included in their workbooks. Through these discussions, each group will form a consensus as to what they feel needs to be addressed in the OCP. The workbooks should be handed in to municipal hall by Aug. 31.

Kevin Damaskie, sustainability coordinator for the RMOW, said through these brainstorming sessions the municipality can collect the most valid and varied input from a wide group of contributors for the first major update of the OCP since 1993. This model also provides people a forum for more thoughtful representations of their concerns than might be displayed at a town hall meeting.

"We're making a request of the community of what does this plan look like to you? What does Whistler look like to you in five years and what are the tools we need to build that?" he said.

Anyone can take part in these sessions. Second homeowners and temporary workers make up a large section of the community and Damaskie said it would be a shame not to include them in the discussions, even if they are here part-time or for the short-term.

"I don't care if you're from Australia, Zimbabwe or Vancouver, if you're here for more than five minutes, and you feel you have a role as an active citizen, your role as an active citizen is really important," he said.

So far, about 40 Backyard Brainstorm workbooks have gone out and staff won't know how much traction they are getting until completed workbooks start rolling in.

Once that happens, they will pour over the workbooks, pulling information to shape a general policy outline that will eventually become the updated OCP. It is expected to be completed "sometime in the first half of 2011," Damaskie said. There's no hard deadline yet for the OCP because "engaging the community is totally organic."

Once a general outline has been completed, Damaskie said the RMOW needs to have "some very smart policy" to create a long-term vision that will carry the community for the next 25 years.

"It's taken a generation to create what's happening here," he said. "If we made one bad year of decisions, we would never get that back. You couldn't make this happen again."

Groups that submit workbooks by Aug. 6 are entered into a draw for two tickets to the Artrageous art festival or two entries to the Cheakamus Challenge bike race. ■

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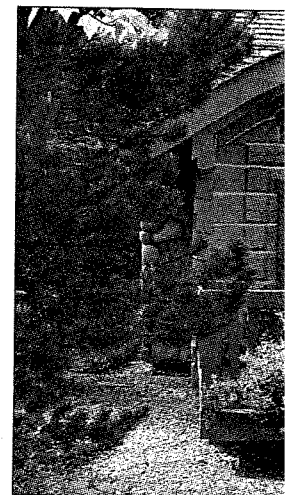
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