

Small Group Discussion on Poverty Report

Sicamous and Columbia Regional District Area E

The communities and rural areas represented in the discussions were Sicamous, Malakwa, Swansea Point, and rural areas of Sicamous Two Mile, Cambie Soslqua, Old Town, and Spallumcheen Road areas. Our area is represented Federally by MP Mel Arnold, Provincially by Sicamous' s own Greg Kylo, MLA, Regionally by Columbia Shuswap Regional District Director of Area E, Rhona Martin, and Municipally by Mayor Terry Rysz and 6 Council members.

Events were hosted by Eagle Valley Community Support Society. Four events took place, two in the community of Malakwa and two at the EVCSS Resource Centre building in Sicamous. We hosted groups that included low income seniors, families with children, a group of those living on some form of disability income, and a more general group that included farming families and small business owners. We had a total of 46 people who came out and provided input. In three sessions, meals were provided, one session had an afternoon tea. At the families with children session, children's activities were planned and provided by child minders in an adjoining room.

Other groups who worked with EVCSS to support the process were Malakwa Community Association, Malakwa Playschool Society, and Sicamous and Malakwa Early Childhood Development Committee. Many thanks to Kathy Keele, a Malakwa resident who cares passionately about her community and its well-being and who organized the events there and acted as scribe.

What is also worth noting about this process was the pride with which those who participated viewed the area and the value of living here. There was strong recognition of the efforts of the Eagle Valley Community Support Society, Malakwa Community Centre Association, Swansea Point Community Association, Malakwa Playschool Society, Eagle Valley Senior Citizens Housing Society, the Faith community, local Work BC office, Sicamous and District Recreation Society, Sicamous and District Chamber of Commerce, and the Sicamous Senior's Centre. All were mentioned and clearly viewed as groups working hard to offer services to our area at a level rarely seen in small communities anymore, and there was recognition of volunteer efforts in general and the financial support through donations by so many who want to make life better for all.

There was also an appreciation of the difficult job of municipal and regional governments, both elected officials and staff, and a strong vote of confidence in those who currently serve. It was felt that these people have all the attributes to move us forward, they just need the support from Provincial and Federal governments to explore what we require to create our own unique economy and the ways of ensuring all residents get value, and that we appreciate and treasure our way of life.

The issues identified as being a part of the reason for area poverty and those affecting the quality of life and ability to succeed, compiled from all events were:

- Seasonal employment, or lack of opportunity for full time employment.
- No licenced and/or affordable child care for families.
- High cost of housing to purchase, not enough housing available.
- High cost of rental housing, not enough rental housing and many sub-standard accommodations, not safe for children.
- No transportation linking Area E communities or linking to Salmon Arm, Enderby, Vernon etc. that are within commuting distance for work.
- No local around town transportation now that taxi business has gone under.
- High cost of living rurally, such as the cost of food, fuel, hydro, internet, etc. and not having cheaper options such as a variety of heating source offerings, internet and phone options, food options etc. that urban centres have that are based on competition in the market, infrastructure and technology available etc.
- Lack of access to services. Only one Dr., limited lab service, no Income Assistance office etc. Community Care services not reliable. Better at Home program for seniors but no programming for those with disabilities.
- Good access to mental health supports, resources etc. in comparison to many areas, but could still be more, maybe more support group type.
- Lack of education and skills training opportunities, nearest College usually only offering courses in Salmon Arm, and not enough that could make a difference to what rural people need to be successful.
- Lack of effort put into supporting the further development of agriculture for this area, or a return to the family farm as an option for at least one household income.
- All levels of government, with the exception of some local representation, acting as though rural living is an “indulgent” choice people make and that you have to suck up what is difficult or move to an urban centre.
- No recognition from governments that we can’t survive or grow on a tourism and/or agriculture-based economy unless we find the way to “value” those fields of service, through providing respect for the work, incentives for families to remain rural, and breaks such as credits etc. that recognize the incomes we are really living on here.
- Changes to legislation, bylaws etc. without regard to the impact on rural life, such as allowing logging companies to haul logs out of the area they are harvested in, which resulted in a closure of the lumber mills that employed many residents full time, changes to the ALR and its impact on the agricultural economy, also, allowing residential homes needed for rental or purchase to be sold to out of province owners who don’t live in them, and/or housing that is now used as seasonal tourism rentals through Airbnb type sites.

What could help to address these identified issues, compiled from all sessions:

- Opportunities for support to those who may open a new business if they will consider a rural location.
- Opportunities for local groups to receive support for the development of social enterprises etc. that will employ people but don't need to make a profit.
- Help from all levels of government to increase agriculture production, help with looking at new crops that suit land and farming capacity, training for those who wish to grow food on land that is currently fallow, etc.
- Incentives and expertise support for developing Co-operative bodies of the type that used to enhance farming or business activities by providing member benefits such as insurances, lower cost fuel, products or feed and seed etc.
- Help with figuring out how we can attract and/or educate more people who would be willing to work as child care providers.
- Government needs to ensure that child care workers are compensated at a rate that makes sense for the difficult job they do. No one would do that work for what is paid by most centres.
- Government needs to figure out the way to offer child care at a cost that makes sense. If you have a working partner, you can choose to stay home, but if you are single, you have to earn a very good living to afford quality child care.
- Adjustments to rules and guidelines for rural child care settings that take into account some of the challenges of our seasonal economy and also more support provided to rural communities from Child Care Resource and Referral type bodies.
- More support from Provincial government regarding purchased housing. Come and talk to us about what we can do, help us to create solutions, create legislation to address some of our challenges, provide funds that fit what we need, provide support for local and regional governments to focus on housing solutions.
- Provide more renovation and upgrade funds for low income homeowners and adjust rules of those that exist to reflect the reality of getting work quoted and completed in rural areas.
- More support for rural rental housing. Work with rural communities to allow farmers to offset cost of farm operations by putting mobile or tiny homes etc. on their property.
- Provide funding opportunities for current mobile home park owners to update units and put in new ones.
- Rent caps based on the reality of our economy. Landlords want rental income similar to urban centres, but no one here is making the income to support that, so need caps and tax credits for rural landlords.
- Provide support and funds for local government and communities to develop a rural rental housing plan that is comprehensive, unique to our area and takes into account our seasonal economy, the need for temporary housing etc.

- Provide funds to help the group that volunteered its time to inventory all the transportation options and costs in our region to hire some transportation expertise and pull together the information and some solutions into a business plan.
- Provide incentives and the extra insurance etc. for individuals to get a van or larger vehicle to provide transit to small numbers of people to places the driver is already going, such as someone from Malakwa who works in Sicamous or Revelstoke and could take others, or someone from Sicamous who works in Salmon Arm.
- Provide funds, not tax credits, to those who need to purchase transportation to be able to go to work. Most of the people here don't earn enough to see any value from tax credits.
- Health Connections bus does provide a good service twice a week for those with medical appointments, but Provincial government could look at what this is really costing and whether that limited usefulness could be expanded with a little outside the box thinking.
- Provincial government needs to understand that offering BC Transit service once per week to a rural community is all but useless. They need to learn more about rural communities to be helpful.
- Address the inequity of the cost of rural living with tax credits similar to Northern Living Allowance type of thing.
- Where there is proof that we are paying more for services and basics, either we need to be able to receive some relief or the businesses that serve us need to receive incentives to lower costs in line with city services.
- Government could do more rural studies, getting the real picture, the value and the costs of living without adequate access to services and supports. Look at impacts of limited access to medical care, unbalanced economy, lack of transportation, not enough housing etc. Really focus some time and money on this.
- Government could provide more funding to Colleges and Universities that will bring specialized outreach education opportunities. Okanagan College has shown its willingness to deliver classes within our community, but the "minimum" numbers etc. defeat their good intentions.
- Provide more incentives for businesses to pay for training for its employees.
- Provide technology to allow rural communities to offer places where students can attend classes virtually. Our communities all have the places, just not the money or expertise to do it.
- All levels of government could look at legislative changes to support rural living better. Changes to business operation rules, housing rental and purchase, ALR, etc. that are based solely on creating equity and support for the rural way of life and the value it brings to BC.

- Help with developing a “community collective” type body that could allow the community to put money into shares that will support any number of ventures. Housing, farming, transportation etc.

There are many more that are worded slightly differently, but whose essence is captured in something stated above.

The top three issues from the Seniors group:

1. Not enough low-income housing, either rental or purchase.
2. No guaranteed access to medical services and home care type supports.
3. No enough transportation, either around town, or to other communities.

The top three solutions from the Seniors group:

1. More incentives for developers to develop multi level seniors housing developments, some purchased, some rental etc. and more support for Eagle Valley Seniors Citizens Housing Society to meet the future need without overwhelming the volunteer directors of the society with the level of financial and fiduciary responsibility.
2. Ensure that rural communities with high populations of seniors are guaranteed medical, lab and home support type services.
3. Support the creation of some sort of community owned taxi so that people can get around town for a reasonable cost.

The top three issues from the PWD/WCB/ CPP Disability group:

1. Not enough income on any of the various sources of disability income to have any quality of life if you are mentally or physically disabled in BC.
2. Not enough low income rental housing that accommodates those with disabilities of any age.
3. Not enough specialized supports for those with disabilities, such as flexible workplaces, transportation options, re-training or education programs, meal programs etc.

The top three solutions from the PWD/WCB/ CPP Disability group:

1. Raise benefit rates for disabled people.
2. Provide funds and support for the development of housing options.
3. Provide funds to local non-profits and organizations that provide supports to be able to offer more specific supports to those with disabilities.

The top three issues from the Families with Children group:

1. Not enough affordable rental or purchasable housing.
2. Not enough full-time work.
3. No licensed or affordable child care.

The top three solutions from the Families with Children group:

1. Provide funding and expertise to develop more housing and address the challenges of sub-standard housing.
2. Provide funding and expertise to help draw more full-time employment, and work on creating balance by accepting and valuing what our economy is, by providing education and skills training that relates, and opens up new opportunities in the existing economy.
3. Provide support for the development of child care that recognizes the unique needs in rural settings and a seasonal economy, along with supporting education for child care workers and lowering child care costs.

The top three issues from the Mixed Group:

1. Not enough opportunity for employment or business development.
2. Not enough rental housing development.
3. Not enough transportation development.

The top three solutions from the Mixed Group:

1. Governments could provide funds to rural communities to develop their own business and employment solutions through the hiring of expertise to support co-op development and other forms of “we can help ourselves” kind of structures that will help to balance the economy through enhancing agriculture and agritourism, cottage industry, re-opening lumber mills to do value added products etc.
2. Governments could provide funds to help develop housing solutions that are outside the box and work with the assets we have such as Twin Anchors Manufacturing, support to current landowners such as farmers to allow housing development, and support to current mobile home park owners to update their parks and offer safe and affordable housing.
3. Governments could provide funds to allow us to hire the expertise to develop a truly “unique to our region” transportation plan that has a role for everything from the current volunteer driver programs, to a revamp of the Health Connections bus system, incentives for car pools, and community owned transportation systems being employed to meet the real needs.

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