

Comox Valley Farmers Market Communiqué

Funding from IAFBC made it possible for this project not only to meet its initial goal of providing a governance structure for the Comox Valley A Place for Agriculture, but also to provide the wherewithal to monitor its implementation over the first year or two of its life. Neither the development of the structure nor its subsequent tailoring would have been possible without that support. Funding also was provided by the Comox Valley Farmers' Market Association.

The Comox Valley Farmers' Market Association (CVDMA) is a successful year round farmers' market operation raising the profile of local agricultural operations and locally grown agricultural products. The Association reinforces the value of Comox Valley's agricultural industry to the local community as a social, cultural, education and economic asset. It views itself as the public face of agriculture.

The Association has been planning to relocate its very successful weekday and weekend markets from their current sites. In the case of the Saturday market, the popularity of the market, with its crowds and associated parking issues, has made it difficult for customers to visit the market. As a result, the Market risks what American baseball legend Yogi Berra noted when he said, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." For the Wednesday market, the costs associated with the site are becoming prohibitive.

It was for these reasons that the CV Farmers Market began to look for another site and is fortunate enough to have a relationship with the City of Courtenay and Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) and has obtained land for a permanent market site in a most strategic location. The cost of the land itself will be negligible through a long-term lease at a minimal annual rate. (NOTE: a capital campaign and facility construction are separate from the governance project.)

A *Governance Structure* project was created to assist the Association in making a transition to a partnership with Ducks Unlimited Canada and the City of Courtenay in advance of moving their Market activities to a new location and facility. The governance observations and recommendations that came out of the project are designed to recognize each partner's special interest in the project's long-term success. The successful completion of a governance agreement will further strengthen the partnership by bringing together separate organizations to more effectively serve a much broader segment of the local population.

The process for establishing a governance system is simple, but it's not necessarily easy:

1. Identify the key stakeholders who have direct interest in the operation of the market. Also identify any others with an interest in the market who can give feedback and advice that will strengthen the system.
2. Clarify with each key stakeholder their requirements and preferences for participation in the project and partnership.
3. Capture those requirements in a governance agreement.
4. Work with the partners individually or collectively to ensure that the agreement captures their concerns clearly and completely
5. Produce a final agreement for signature.

With three players in the Comox Valley Farmers' Market game, it became clear that a governance structure would enhance the partnership and ease the move to, and operations on, the new site. Discussions followed with the three key stakeholders, as well as other interested parties. The outcome

to date consists of a set of outcomes and limitations that will comprise the final governance agreement. That agreement is nearing completion and will be made public in the near future.

During the project, a decision was made to relocate only the Wednesday morning market as a 3-year trial run on the new site, leaving the Saturday market in its current location. As a result, and because tenure on the new site will evolve in three years, the governance agreement subsequently will be adjusted to accommodate a long-term tenure in a permanent facility. Nonetheless, a driving principle behind governance is that the system should, or must, be able to deal efficiently and successfully with such developments.

Milestones for the project that have been completed are:

1. Three key partners were identified: Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), owners of the land where the Farmers' Market is proposed to operate; the City of Courtenay, lessees of the land; and the Comox Valley Farmers' Market Association (CVFMA), which will sub-lease the land and be anchor tenants, and are proponents of a permanent Place for Agriculture in the Comox Valley.
2. Several "interested parties" with no direct stake in the operation of the market, including the Comox Valley Regional District, the Village of Cumberland and the Town of Comox and a local contact with the BC government's agriculture ministry, were asked for their input to the process.
3. Initial interviews and discussions were completed to identify partners' requirements for the operation, both in terms of what must be present and what must not be present for their involvement, as well as what the partners would like to see or not see but could live with (or without).
4. A draft of a proposed governance document was prepared for the three partners and presented to the spring meeting of the CVFMA. A final review is pending.
5. A final governance agreement will be prepared for signature by the three partners when a final agreement on the site has been reached.
6. A final report was prepared for submission to the funders.

By all appearances, this project has been successful, so far as it's gone. All parties contacted with regard to governance issues were in strong support of the initiative and participated fully in initial consultations. It was clearly understood by everyone that a good governance process was critical, and so they willingly contributed their thoughts, concerns, issues and vision for the partnership and the new *Place for Agriculture*.

The only real issues that have arisen so far are (1) the decision by the Association to relocate only the Wednesday morning market, at least for the time being; (2) the decision by Ducks Unlimited Canada to offer only a 3-year lease at the outset; and (3) some last-minute confusion about site specifications. These have resulted in both short-term and longer-term delays in completing the project. While inconvenient, they are not serious, and in fact provide a test of the flexibility of the governance process. We continue to work towards the satisfaction of all the parties involved.

Probably the one best lesson this project offers, one not that different from other such endeavours, is that "Life is what happens to you when you're planning for the future." The original project anticipated the total relocation of Market activities to the new site, a long-term lease providing some structure and security to the future of the Market, and the initiation of a capital development project to fund the construction of a permanent market facility on the designated property. At least two, if not all three, of

these anticipations have had to be modified, resulting in some minor operational modifications to the project plan itself.

The CVFMA is aware that similar operations frequently struggle to bring together resources to enable growth and expansion of their markets. Finding partners is one challenge. Building a collaboration that works is another challenge altogether. The CVFMA firmly believes that the partnership model that this project will produce can guide other, similar operations across the province and the country that face many of the same challenges.

Acknowledgement

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Funding also was provided by the Comox Valley Farmers' Market Association.

Project information and funder support will be communicated to these targets:

1. Comox Valley Farmers' Market Association members
2. Local media
3. The Farmers' Institute
4. City of Courtenay
5. Comox Valley Regional District
6. BC Association of Farmers' Markets
7. BC Provincial Government Ministry of Agriculture
8. Farmers' Markets Canada