



A COWICHAN SNAPSHOT

Survey Results from One Cowichan
February 2013



one.
cowichan.ca



Introduction

The Cowichan River flow crisis of 2012 galvanized local citizens to raise their voices to ask for change. The provincial government had ignored requests to store more water for release during the drought, and the local salmon migration suffered as a result. Hundreds of Cowichan citizens joined together to ask the province to make sure this did not happen again, and ultimately to give control to the local level so that we can make those decisions for ourselves.

One Cowichan was born as a vehicle for these voices. There is clearly an appetite among local citizens to join together—witnessed also by the gathering sponsored by One Cowichan at the Quw’utsun’ Cultural Centre where about 250 people came out to hear from and to question decision makers.

Given this appetite to join together, One Cowichan conducted an online survey in January of this year to ask what local citizens care about, and what more we might want to do collectively. About 170 people answered the survey, and this mini-report is an effort to capture what was said in general terms. Apologies to those who don’t see their specific answers reflected – we tried our best to capture the main themes.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to fill out the survey, and whether or not you did, please consider joining with your neighbours to make the Cowichan Valley a great place to live, work and play. Participating in One Cowichan is way to make that happen.

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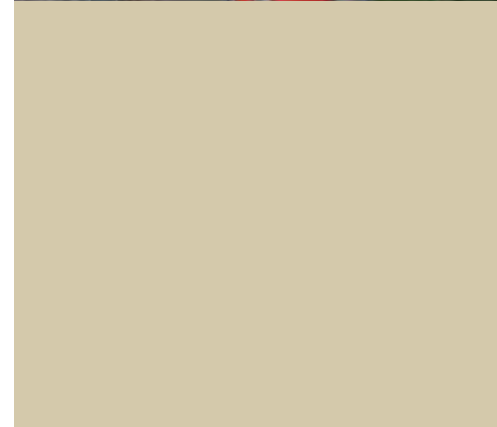
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“It’s simply the most beautiful place on Earth.”

Question

What are three things that make you want to live in the Cowichan Valley instead of someplace else?

Results

People clearly love living in the Cowichan Valley. Things that came up again and again in the survey were the natural surroundings and in particular the lake, the rivers, the forest, the mountains, the ocean, and the fish and wildlife that depend on them. Many people value getting outside for fishing, hiking, swimming, and camping.

The mild climate is appreciated, as is the largely rural nature of the Valley that allows for great farms and great food. Many people said that this makes the Valley more relaxed and easy going and also a less expensive place to live. At the same time, it’s easy to get to larger centres like Victoria or Nanaimo.

Several people also spoke about the importance of local First Nations culture to the Valley, with Cowichan Tribes being the largest First Nation in BC.

Cowichan citizens also seem to like one another. Many have deep family roots here and others find locals to be friendly. A number of survey respondents described a vibrant set of organizations that are working hard to meet people’s needs and desire for local culture and music. Several talked about a real sense of community in living here.

“Downtown Duncan! What people don’t know exists if they’d turn off the highway.”

“First of all, it is the ancestral place of the Quw’utsun peoples. Hopefully all public people will start honoring that spelling to acknowledge this fact.”

“If you live here, and truly embrace living here, then you know why Cowichan is the only place to be.”



Question

What are three things about life in the Cowichan Valley that you'd like to see improve?

Results

There was less convergence in answers to the question about what to improve in the Valley than there was about what is already great about it. Nevertheless, some overall themes did emerge.

Not surprisingly, since a lot of people first heard about One Cowichan through the river issue, water management figured prominently in peoples' answers. And, this includes getting more local control over flow management, but also includes other issues like water quality in our rivers and the estuary where shellfish harvesting is currently banned due to pollution. Several people mentioned the impacts of clearcutting and over-harvesting of forests on water, as well as the importance of riparian protection.

Many answers spoke to issues about how we get around. There is clearly a hunger for better transit, better and safer bike lanes and trails, and less congestion along the Highway, particularly in light of climate change. This was mentioned not just within the Valley, but also in the context of getting to and from Victoria and whether commuter rail is possible.

Several people spoke about the need to develop the local economy in order to provide opportunities for young people as well as everyone else. Ideas included more value added wood products, help for both growing and processing more local and organic food, and better employment programs.

Local governments came under some scrutiny. Some pointed to "fiscal waste" and the need for streamlining, including the consideration of amalgamation. Others wanted less "bickering" in local government and a greater effort to listen to the public when making big decisions.

Related is the perception that we do not have adequate regional planning, and that this is leading to poorly thought out development and urban sprawl. Specific projects that came up included Mount Tzouhalem and Stoney Point. Several people spoke to the need to redevelop existing built areas rather than pave over new land.

"Basin thinking - we are all in this together. What goes on upstream affects those of us downstream."



"I try to support local business. I think we have as many big box stores as we need."

On social issues, people called for more services for people with disabilities and seniors, as well as expanded drug and alcohol counselling. Some want more fun free activities for youth. Several spoke to the need for a closer relationship between First Nations and non-Native communities, and First Nations housing was flagged as a particular need.

Several responders said we are not doing enough to educate people about the impacts of climate change and to prepare for them. Other environmental issues that were mentioned repeatedly were garbage, composing and recycling, as well as air quality and the need to get a better handle on burning.

“I’d like to see the Cowichan Valley become a leading example of regional stewardship for an important river.”



“Greater willingness of authorities to upgrade and enforce legislation to protect the watershed.”



“Right away there are many issues, but one that is important is to clean up the estuary and then protect it from future pollution.”

Question

What’s an issue facing us right now that you think needs citizen advocacy right away?

Results

As we saw in the last section, there is a diversity of opinions on areas needing improvement in our Valley, reflecting the fact that there are indeed many things for us to work on. Ultimately, though, as a citizens group with limited resources, we need to make choices about what we can take on at any given time to actually achieve something.

The question asking for one issue needing attention right now resulted in many different answers, but the biggest grouping of them concerned how we manage our water and our watershed. Again, this is not surprising given that most people first heard about One Cowichan during the river flow issue.

The river flow issue is not resolved – either in terms of who makes decisions about water storage or how much water should be stored and when. Climate change also means our assumptions based on past flow patterns will be increasingly outdated, meaning we need to manage more risk. The Valley also clearly has water pollution problems. These have resulted in long-term shellfish harvesting closures in the estuary and in health concerns for people swimming in some places around the Valley at certain times. Riparian and forest management issues also have a direct impact on water and fish health.

The prominence of Idle No More led several respondents to call for more activities to bring greater understanding between local First Nations and non-Native residents. A number of people mentioned the connection between Idle No More and watershed management issues and the need to respond to recent rollbacks of environmental protections by Ottawa.

There is a lot of concern about Stoney Hill and the proposed road on Maple Bay peninsula. This concern is not only that a road would likely lead to more urban sprawl, but also about how this and other decisions are made, seemingly without the support of the broader public.

Other significant mentions included restoring train service and addressing air quality due to burning.

“All the other good work we might accomplish will be lost if we do not address climate change.”

“Action on building a more resilient community by more strongly supporting local agriculture and small scale co-ops.”

“Improving community consultation requirements such that costly issues do not proceed unless sufficient support is demonstrated.”

“We need true consultation and reconciliation with the land and Indigenous peoples, and a change of the education system to include the living classroom connection to the land.”



Question

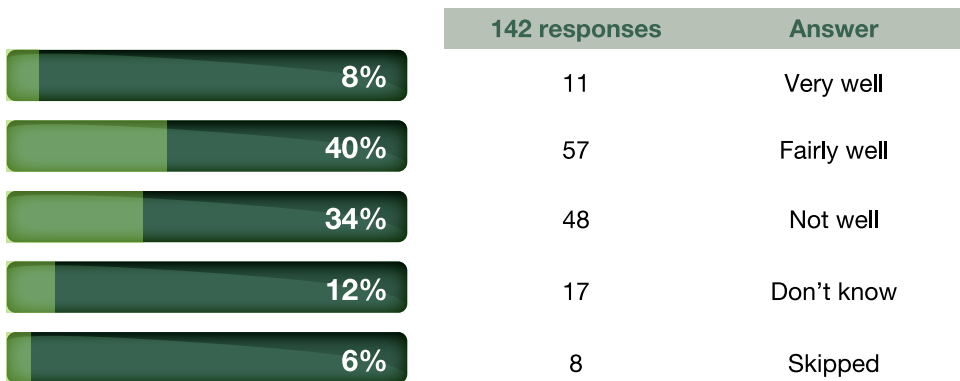
How do you feel your local, provincial, and federal politicians represent you?

Results

Our elected officials are ultimately those responsible in our democracy for making decisions that shape life in the Cowichan Valley. We were curious to see how citizens thought our elected officials were doing. Clearly, this is not a scientific poll.

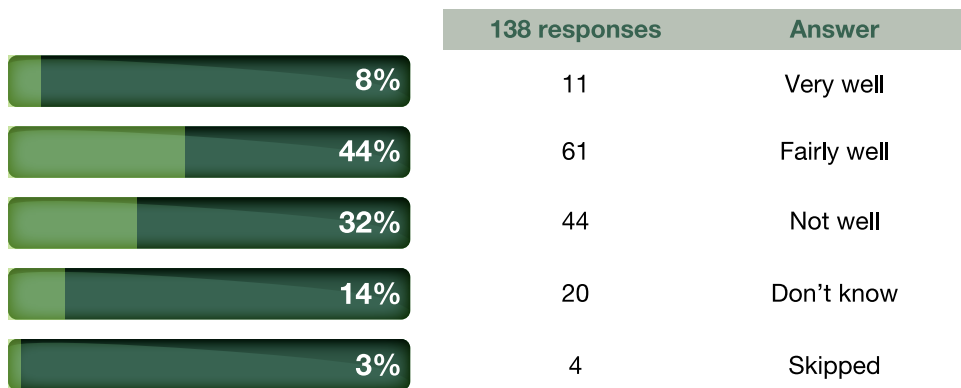
When you add the “very well” to “fairly well” ratings together, on a relative scale respondents favoured our federal, provincial, then local representatives, in that order. Again, relatively, people were most enthusiastic about our federal representative. These ratings compare favourably to polls done at the national and provincial level for party leaders at that level.¹

I feel that my local politicians represent me...

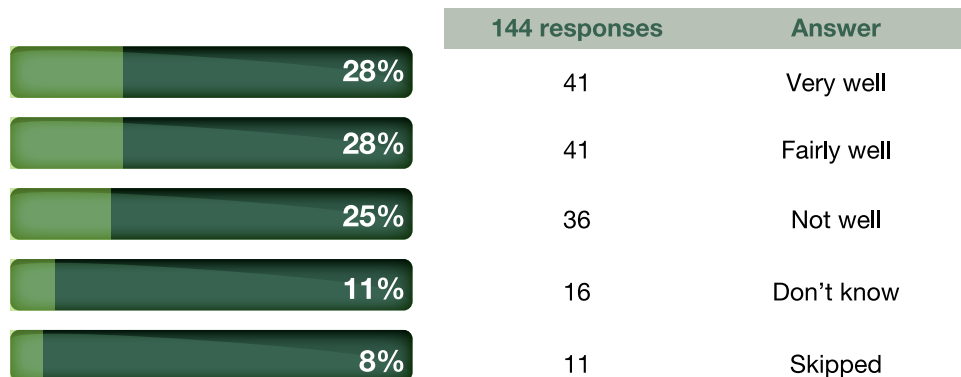


¹ See for example: <http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/48591/new-democrats-have-15-point-lead-over-bc-liberals-in-british-columbia/> and <http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/48586/conservatives-stable-ndp-drops-and-liberals-gain-in-canada/>

I feel that my provincial Member of the Legislature represents me...



I feel that my federal Member of Parliament represents me...



Question

Please complete this sentence: “I would support a local citizens group in the Cowichan Valley that...”

Results

There was quite a bit of consensus around wanting a nimble citizens group that brings people together around a sustainable and just local environment and economy – one that includes reconciliation between First Nations and non-Native residents, as well as looks out for the vulnerable.

Here is a sample of specific answers:

- “...connects the particular ecosystem and social issues we face locally with the larger issues of climate change, equity and justice we face as a broader human community.”
- “...works with the conservation, preservation and enhancement of the Cowichan River.”
- “...promotes a balance of business development and environmental responsibility.”
- “...was positive and worked to improve the quality of life in Cowichan.”
- “...that helps to give citizen voice in matters that affect them favouring a proactive approach to problem solving.”
- “...was nimble on its feet in reacting to local issues.”
- “...links social justice and 1st Nations issues with the elephant issue - climate change - that threatens to sweep away every bit of civilization.”
- “...does not hold long meetings and gets on with matter in hand.”
- “...encourages a bike friendly town, greater cultural exchange between first nations leaders and the rest of us, builds resiliency in the face of climate change in a thousand different ways.”
- “...encourages lake/river/water management that meets the needs of all residents and stakeholders.”
- “...brings local people together to develop local solutions to issues and to celebrate local successes.”



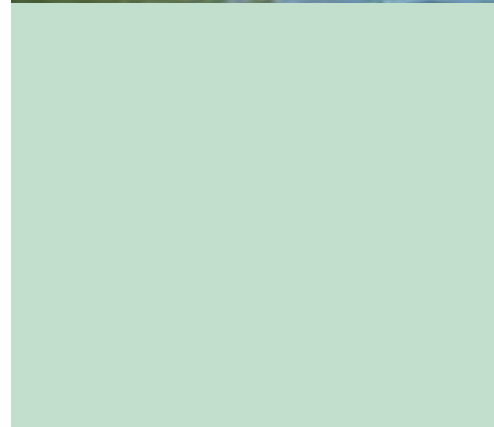
“...ensures that government functions for the public good –not for any private, or ideological interest.”

“...works to unite the people to help meet their needs and give them a voice.”

“...has enough clout to influence politicians. This valley is unique and we want to keep it that way.”

“Don’t reinvent the wheel!!!”

“I believe there is strength in numbers and when community works together the job may get done or acknowledged sooner.”





Question

Do you have any other comments?

Results (partial)

“This is a nice community and I’ve seen its growth over the past 6 years. It has great potential for further growth, but I’d still like it to stay as a nice, quiet community, where citizens feel safe on the streets and in their homes.”

“Please continue this networking of positive action to protect the valley.”

“I have lived in the valley all my life, I know it will not be the same as when I was young but, we need to effect changes before we can’t.”

“I wish to live in a more inclusive community with my First Nations community. I feel that there is a wall between us.”

“More festivals!”

“You have asked a lot about me without telling me anything about yourselves. Who are One Cowichan? Not an auspicious beginning.”

“It has been proven time after time, that when the community voices their concerns, they will be heard.”

“It would be nice to develop a local on-line forum to decide how taxes are spent, what issues are most important, and feedback to local government.”

“We live in a rough society nowadays, we just have to try and respect everyone equally, and I know that we can, we just have to work at it.”

“It is high time to bridge the gap between the upper valley and the lower part. The fragmentation of the past has worked against us.”

“We need to develop a collective voice and bring groups together here in the valley with a more cohesive voice. Facilitate an informed general community discussion that promotes a stronger direction. Champion issues that broader community can understand and get behind.”

“One Cowichan needs to scope more and take the long view.”

“I love this valley and live on the Cowichan River. Life is good, small town, big possibility!”



Conclusion – Where Do These Results Go?

One Cowichan works to bring citizens together to press for change on issues they care about. This survey is one effort at starting to figure that out, but ultimately it will be the energy of local citizens themselves that defines what we do. The world is run by those who show up.

The survey, while showing the wonderful diversity of our Valley, did nevertheless provide a clear mandate to work on getting more local control and better management of our watershed so that we can address issues of water quantity and quality. In the lead up to the May 2013 provincial election, we will therefore be running a non-partisan initiative to get all candidates to adopt a positive position on this. We need help, so if this appeals to you, please be in touch.

The survey also showed that we cannot ignore the relationship between local First Nations and non-Native citizens. The Idle No More movement has shown that we all share in the legacy of unresolved Treaty issues (for those are two-way relationships), especially here on Vancouver Island where the treaty rights and title of the Hul'qumi'num people have yet to be recognized, and we also share a common concerns for the land, water and our children's future. This relationship is integral to moving forward on the issues we are facing today, including watershed management.

These provide us some starting points for the next few months, but again it's really up to you, the citizens of the Valley to show up and to bring new issues to the One Cowichan brand, or else to get together through other vehicles to make change.

What do you think? Please give us any feedback you have to this mini-report through any of the points of contact listed at the start of this document.

Thanks again for taking the survey and for using your voice to make a better Valley. There is power in numbers, so we hope you will continue to show up.

