

## **A Vision for Denman Downtown/aka the Village**

“Keep Denman weird” is a bumper sticker, but could it also be a planning principle?

This was one of the questions discussed at the four-day intensive planning project known as the Denman Island Downtown/Village Charrette, Sept 6 – 9<sup>th</sup> at the Activity Centre. The event brought 21 Masters of Community Planning students from Vancouver Island University to Denman Island to look, learn, study, listen to Islanders, and then, based on all that, create proposals.

There were two sessions for the public to share likes and dislikes, values, hopes, dreams and fears. It soon became clear that downtown/the village is well-loved. We appreciate our two halls, our Medical Centre, our retail and food-service outlets, playground and sports field, the school, the trails, green spaces and the outdoor sitting areas. We like the aesthetic, which reflects the decentralized, organic way this area has grown. No one seems to want dramatic or sudden changes, and we want to make sure that the things we love are protected.

But we have things that bother us, and we have dreams and ideas. We worry about traffic and pedestrian safety. In the summer especially, parking is a source of stress. Angled parking is, statistically, the least safe type of parking possible. As well as making the roads safer, people would like to see the area be more welcoming to pedestrians.

Lack of physical accessibility is another challenge. The current walking paths, with their gravel surfacing, are not easily navigated by anyone using a wheelchair or walker or with mobility challenges. Few of the buildings are accessible. Another goal is cultural accessibility, which (to me) means that everyone, regardless of race, class, level of weirdness, physical ability, age, and other social markers, should feel welcome.

Many of us have thoughts about the currently empty or under-used properties in the downtown. There’s a sense of lost potential; what wonderful things could happen here?

“Wants” include a public toilet, visual markers of First Nations’ history and relationship to the Island, a covered outdoor seating area, more public art, a safe pedestrian trail to and from the ferry, more renewable energy, green infrastructure, an electric car charging station, less concrete, more natural materials, public shower and laundry facilities, and better knowledge of and protection for the natural ecosystem.

Also, the community’s need for affordable, attainable, accessible and seniors’ housing came up repeatedly. Water and septic were recognized as limiting factors for housing, services and businesses.

The students, aided by their professors, Dave Witty, the VIU Provost and Vice President, and Michael von Housen, a planning consultant affiliated with VIU (who just published a book about

planning downtown areas for small communities), put all this input into their creative cauldron and cooked up four different draft designs.

Here are some of the ideas:

- Boardwalks throughout downtown to provide beautiful, environmentally friendly and accessible pedestrian access;
- A tiny-home project on the current EMCON lot;
- WHAT KIND OF IDEAS WERE THERE FOR THE RAWGANIQUE SITE????
- Night-time fairy lights on tree stumps;
- Tiny-to-small infill housing (cottages) tucked in next to the Community Hall and elsewhere;
- Centralized rainwater catchment for the downtown area;
- A natural reed-bed sewage treatment project;
- Attractive traffic-calming features, such as art painted on the road (for instance, depicting Denman's history) and innovative rumble strips that allow bits of earth to remain exposed;
- Secret paths and gardens tucked away behind buildings;
- Replacing the concrete barrier outside the school with a trail or boardwalk;
- A produce-stand for local products;
- Limiting angled parking to only one side of Northwest Road;
- A trail connecting the Medical Centre;
- A public toilet and shower facility (next to the Community Hall);
- Covered outdoor areas...and more....

The question remains as to how any or all of this could get done, if indeed enough of us want it. Some of these proposals could be achieved by community groups, by downtown/village property owners individually or working together, or by various governing agencies. The Denman Island Local Trust Committee (LTC) will be discussing possible next steps at its next meeting, October 3, at 9:30 am, in the Activity Centre.

On behalf of the Denman LTC, thank you to Vancouver Island University, the planning students and their leaders, the Activity Centre, Elkhaven, and especially to all the Islanders who participated by coming to the public events and/or talking with the students in their travels around Denman.