REPORT

VitalConversations

May 31, 2014



BOWEN ISLAND COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



Executive Summary

Now celebrating a decade of service, the Bowen Island Community Foundation marked the milestone by holding a "Vital Conversation", an event aimed at creating a clearer picture of community needs. About 60 islanders, intentionally selected for maximum diversity, participated in the half-day agenda. Their mission? To help guide the Foundation's work, with both donors and grant recipients, on initiatives that touch all aspects of our community.

Through a series of questions to guide the conversation, participants identified:

- Strengths of the community;
- Opportunities for improvement;
- · Root causes and obstacles underlying the opportunity areas; and
- A wide range of possible solutions.

Participants named these as priority improvement opportunities:

- 1. Public Dialogue: This is a primary opportunity identified by participants; many expressed a need for leadership to create a vehicle for respectful dialogue and consensus-building in relation to community issues.
- 2. Community Gathering Place: Participants believe there is insufficient clarity to move forward, calling for a "champions" team to re-invigorate the process, clarify the feasible possibilities, and complete this high priority project.
- 3. Healthcare Services: Concerned that Bowen is seriously underserved in urgent care and, in light of the current healthcare clinic initiative, participants advised developing the clinic on private land if necessary, in a phased modular approach, and offering a balance of preventative and urgent care services.
- 4. Civic Pride: Concerned about the current state of Snug Cove, participants suggested creating a more welcoming arrival experience right at the ferry, and said the community must also address the different visions for the Cove in order to adopt an overall improvement plan.
- 5. Seniors and Marginalized People: Participants believe many are in need on Bowen, and recommend creating a public space open during the day (offering showers, toi-

lets, soup and coffee, and conversation), with a staff resource person who would also be a public voice concerning these needs.

- 6. Environment: Wanting to ensure long term protection of and access to Bowen's exceptional natural environment, participants identified the need for more education, better communication and dialogue, and for addressing issues with the public process.
- 7. Mobility and Transportation: Despite many obstacles in the way of change, participants pinpointed three pragmatic actions, including local car-sharing programs, more links between trail systems, and researching on-island transit needs to improve bus service.

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BOWEN ISLAND'S VITAL CONVERSATIONS

Background

Many of Canada's 150 community foundations have, in the recent past, taken the pulse of their communities through Vital Signs, a program that uses statistical data to capture what actually is taking place in communities. The findings help inform the steps a community can take to become stronger.

With the demise of the Federal Census compulsory long form, Bowen's access to the data required by Vital Signs is extremely limited. Further, the experience from larger communities reveals that costs to implement Vital Signs were substantial even for them.

Bowen island Community Foundation (BICF) developed the Vital Conversation dialogue model based on the Vancouver Foundation's "community conversations" program, adapting and expanding it for Bowen's needs. It is the first such program in Canada. Although these findings are qualitative, and therefore not statistically significant, BICF project coordinators believe that the project structure and unbiased nature of the questions have ensured reliable information about the state of the community.

Process

BICF project co-ordinators developed six questions designed to identify the community's ideas and feelings about opportunities for improvement, related causes and possible solutions. They selected a cross-section of 12 organizational leaders from within the community, and met with them individually to test and refine the questions.

Cates Hill Chapel was selected as the venue, and a list was developed of 150 residents representative of the total community, from youth to seniors. Invitations went out six weeks before the event; the first 65 people responding were accepted. This number was determined by the venue, as well as by a maximum number coordinators believed could be comfortably managed. The event was over-subscribed, so a waiting list was established to replace last-minute cancellations.

Nine facilitators and nine scribes were selected to lead and record individual table discussions, and a professional facilitator was hired to train everyone on facilitation techniques two weeks prior to the event. Facilitator guides and scribe guides were written to ensure a consistent and non-biased approach to guiding the discussions.

The venue was set up with nine tables, each with a flip chart, paper, pens and name tent-cards. In the centre of the room was a large table with an attractive array of healthy refreshments (which proved a highly effective 'ice-breaker' hub as people arrived).

A minute-by-minute schedule was developed to ensure all questions were covered, allowing time for each table to present their ideas to the whole group — all within a two and a half hour time frame. The professional facilitator was on hand to keep the agenda on schedule.

Event

The event opened with a welcome and a slide show of art by Bowen children depicting their feelings about Bowen, accompanied by John Lennon's song, *Imagine*. The music proved to be an excellent choice: spontaneous singing ensued, and the whole room joined in -a "Bowen moment" that provided a warm, and very relevant, opening note to the Conversation.

The process for the morning was presented: Six questions were to be covered in two 40-minute sessions, followed by short presentations to the full group from each table, and allowing for a 15-minute break between sessions.

The fast-paced event stayed precisely on time. At the end of the morning the Board Chair thanked everyone for their participation. The flip charts and minutes of the conversations were collected and, over the next few weeks, this report was written.

The report has been sent to all participants and is available on the <u>foundation's website</u> at <u>bowenfoundation.com</u>.

Table Discussion Format

To ensure diversity, participants were pre-assigned to one of nine table groups, each with about seven people. Table discussions were led by a facilitator and recorded by a

scribe; both had attended a Foundation training session. They were equipped with a detailed agenda for a tightly timed 2.5-hour event with critical ground to cover.

<u>Session One</u> sought to lay the foundations of the Vital Conversation: participants were asked to name elements of a strong community, and then to inventory Bowen's own strengths. With these ideas in mind, participants suggested areas for improvement, in priority order. Key ideas were noted on flip charts, while the scribe captured highlights of the discussion.

In <u>Session Two</u>, each person elected to join a table assigned to "work" one of seven priority areas (chosen by event coordinators based on findings from Session One). Root causes, obstacles and possible solutions were brainstormed for all issues. Each table then created a shortlist of priority action items. Facilitators emphasized practical actions — feasible, affordable, timely — that could be easily implemented by the community.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

SESSION ONE: LAYING FOUNDATIONS

Question 1: The Attributes of A Strong Community

"When you picture a strong community, what stands out in your mind?"

Participants chiefly cited these attributes as essential to a strong community:

- Diversity
- Affordable housing
- · Connectedness and caring
- · Senior-friendly
- Protection of nature
- Access to nature
- · Respect and tolerance
- · Dialogue and consensus-building
- Economic strength
- · Shared vision for the future
- · Healthy population
- Effective transportation

Arts and cultural strength

Question 2: An Inventory of Our Community's Strengths

"What is working on Bowen Island? What are our community's strengths?"

These Bowen strengths topped the list across all tables:

- · A safe place to live
- · Beautiful natural environment
- · Strong sense of community
- · Rooted people
- Unique diversity
- "Pioneering" spirit
- Strong volunteerism
- Vibrant arts community
- · Great place for families with children
- Great recyclers
- · Many valued public amenities and businesses

Question 3: Scoping the Possibilities

"What are the opportunities for improvement that can be addressed by concerned citizens, including the Bowen Island Community Foundation?"

Each group targeted its "top three" areas of improvement; these are aggregated below, with the first three topics emerging as highly important on most peoples' agendas.

Discourse and Dialogue

Opportunity: Better public discourse, both in formal public processes, and in general discourse. Right now, participants say, Bowen Island is "stuck", with too much "reaction" and too little productive discussion, often leading to outcomes few want. Participants called for a more effective way to debate, make decisions and act as a community.

Gathering Place/Community Centre

Opportunity: Refocus on developing a community gathering place. Despite longstanding challenges, the desire to create a "gathering place" has grown. Participants cite an in-

creasing need for public space to accommodate community activities of all kinds—and a need to achieve the "physical manifestation of our close knit culture."

Healthcare

Opportunity: Improve on-island medical care and mental healthcare. Participants offered suggestions for the healthcare clinic initiative now under way. They also identified the need for improvements to life-saving measures, urgent and emergency care, and more support for people with mental health issues, addictions, and disabilities.

Civic Pride: Snug Cove

Opportunity: Improve Snug Cove to better reflect residents' pride in Bowen's natural beauty. Participants envision a more welcoming experience that encourages vibrant interaction among residents and visitors alike.

Mobility and Transportation

Opportunity: Better mobility and transportation options to reduce social isolation and car dependence. There is a growing need for greater walkability and connectivity from place to place on Bowen, and for new transit/ride solutions to enable car-free mobility.

Affordable Diverse Housing Options

Opportunity: Housing options for a range of ages, incomes, abilities and lifestyles. "Diversity" needs a place to live, and the options on Bowen need expanding.

Senior-Friendly Resources

Opportunity: Become a more senior-friendly community, developing services and housing options for aging in place, and do more to ease the isolation of a growing number of Bowen seniors.

Opportunities for Youth

Opportunity: More amenities to make Bowen a better, safer and more rewarding place for youth. While Bowen is rich in services for children, a huge opportunity remains for youth.

Protecting the Environment

Opportunity: Invest in protecting Bowen's natural environment, improve access to waterfronts, and increase Islanders' connections with and knowledge of local nature and ecosystems.

Neighbourhoods

Opportunity: Strengthen community by investing in neighbourhood events and informal gathering places — to help to integrate new residents and ensure that neighbourhood connections stay vibrant.

Community Garden

Opportunity: To create (more) community gardens, fostering new social connectivity and learning, while improving food self-sufficiency.

<u>Volunteerism</u>

Opportunity: Build capacity in one of Bowen's key strength areas by creating more shared resources for the Island's many vital and totally volunteer-dependent community groups and associations.

More Opportunities:

- Improve water awareness and conservation.
- Increase male participation in community activities and volunteering.
- Address drinking and driving on Island roads.
- · Identify, welcome and engage newcomers to Bowen.
- Encourage more interaction with part-time Islanders.

SESSION TWO: BRAINSTORMING SOLUTIONS

During the break, event coordinators quantitatively assessed Session One findings and selected seven high-ranking priority topics to be tackled in Session Two. Participants were asked to join the table of their choice, and work with a new group to pinpoint three feasible, affordable and timely actions. These are presented below, with each topic introduced by a short narrative intended to capture the essence of each table's discourse.

- 1. Public Dialogue
- 2. Community Gathering Place

- 3. Seniors and Marginalized People
- 4. Healthcare
- 5. Environment
- 6. Civic Pride/Snug Cove
- 7. Mobility and Transportation

1. PUBLIC DIALOGUE (2 groups, consolidated results)

Root Causes

Too often, public dialogue on Bowen is not conducted in a productive and collegial manner, even though there is considerable common ground among Islanders. "Reactive" opinions fill a vacuum where many would prefer opportunities for actual conversation. An underlying cause is that Islanders tend to be independent-minded people who are very passionate about their views.

Obstacles

Public consultation processes are good for "yes or no" but not for productive solutionoriented dialogue. As well, "the community" is actually many small communities that have yet to learn how to work together as a whole in the public sphere.

Top Solutions and Actions

- 1. BICF could research the methods of other communities that do a good job of consensus building, and explore other mechanisms such as "thought exchanges."
- 2. BICF could be the exemplar of civilized discourse and consensus building on Bowen Island.
- 3. BICF could establish an Elders/Advisory Council to support these efforts.

2. COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE (2 groups; consolidated results)

Root Causes

A gathering place would bring people together, beyond neighbourhoods, to cohere as a community, enjoy new opportunities for recreation and integration into the community — and the performing arts community would have a proper home. All this would likely re-

sult in fewer trips to the mainland — good for the environment and local economy. Without a specific place, the community lacks a physical "heart". Beyond a centre, other public gathering spaces are envisioned, such an outdoor amphitheatre and village square. Overall, though, what the community wants is a <u>building</u>.

Obstacles

The vision for a gathering place has become blurred; there is insufficient clarity to move forward. Historically, Islanders can be "better at getting to No than Yes", suggesting a deeper problem with how such proposals are discussed and decisions reached.

Top Solutions and Actions

- 1. BICF could take leadership, in a neutral manner, to revive the Community Centre initiative, creating a "champions" team to (apolitically) lead re-engagement and consensus building.
- 2. BICF could fund best-practices research aimed at identifying a short list of realistic approaches.
- 3. Invite Bowen students to design a Community Centre (they are our future).
- 4. Achieve impact affordably on "sense of community" by supporting existing events with small grants, including neighbourhood and cross-neighbourhood initiatives.
- 5. Experiment with a car-free weekend at Artisan Square so people can experience a pedestrian-oriented community gathering place.
- 6. Invite people who want to see more community gathering spaces to join together with their ideas and talents, and build on all the work done to date.
- 7. Create more programs and smaller facilities for sporting events that enable on-island recreation, including more access to the BICS gym.

3. SENIORS AND MARGINALIZED PEOPLE

Root Causes

Participants emphasized that considerable disadvantage and poverty exist on Bowen, increasingly among seniors. The Island's older-skewing demographics suggest there will soon be more older people who face isolation and vulnerability. Other than the Food Bank, and the abiding generosity of individual Islanders, almost no resources exist to deal with these needs.

Obstacles

Space in community buildings is lacking, and funding is a huge obstacle. With the Island's small population, public resources are scarce. Additionally, transportation is a major challenge, with the bus system mostly oriented to commuters. Finally, people who really need support may not seek services due to a perceived stigma.

Top Solutions and Actions

- 1. Hire a Community-wide staff resource person, who would also be a voice to Council concerning needs and solutions.
- 2. Create a public space that offers showers and toilets, and soup and coffee to those in need.

4. HEALTHCARE

Root Causes

Islanders are under-served in healthcare — in fact, less well served in urgent care than in previous years. Why? The assumption is that services in Vancouver are accessible enough. The problem is partly due to Bowen's identity as a bedroom community and its underlying car culture. While some preventative and ancillary services are available, urgent care and after-hours service are not.

Obstacles

Without a clinic or care facility (such as the one on Gabriola Island), night service is not possible, and it is very difficult to attract doctors and nurses. Participants discussed the new healthcare clinic now under way: the "Community Medical Clinic Society of Bowen Island". Land still must be procured, potentially as part of the proposed "community campus".

Top Solutions and Actions

1. The clinic initiative should be modular and proceed in phases (the clubhouse at the golf course began this way). Units could be pre-leased to demonstrate viability, to attract investment capital.

- 2. Explore the possibility of private land with business zoning, since moving forward on community lands will be challenging (e.g. the land near the Ballpark).
- 3. The clinic should be a multi-disciplinary centre offering a balance of urgent and preventative care.

5. ENVIRONMENT

Root Causes

The Environment table began with a basic principle: "The environment is the nest in which our community exists. It supports us, affects our health and everything about us. We are embedded in it." However, it is often difficult to communicate effectively about its importance to us; many on Bowen appreciate "living in nature" without knowing very much about it, and often a stigma is attached to "environmental" communications. As a result, protection of Bowen's "nest" continues to be a real challenge. Growth and environment are not mutually exclusive, but when the community decides to grow, its obligation to protect the environment increases.

Obstacles

There is, overall, insufficient education, communication and healthy, respectful and wellled discourse about it. Obstacles in the political sphere noted were instances of lack of information, transparency and regulation. Participants said that communication "style" can be a major obstacle — more compelling ways must be developed to describe commonly valued natural assets (for example, by using specifics like "forests" and "nature trails" and "foreshore" rather than "the environment", to refer to commonly valued elements of nature).

Top Solutions and Actions

- 1. Enable the community to learn how to empower itself to move from generating ideas to implementing them; the "community development" model is a possible approach.
- 2. Engage Islanders in environmental protection through better communication. A core idea to convey is that "we" are not separate from nature; it is in fact in "the nest" in which the community resides.

3. Develop local champions who initiate and build on respectful discourse about preserving nature on Bowen by developing a properly balanced approach to growth.

6. CIVIC PRIDE AND BEAUTIFICATION

Root Causes

For many, the Cove experience does not reflect Bowen's intrinsic beauty. They are embarrassed by the Cove's "ramshackle" and "random" general appearance and lack of welcoming public spaces. Sure, to local eyes, there's a certain charm, but for visitors it doesn't make a good first impression.

Obstacles

Plans for the Cove are caught up in unresolved differing value sets. To some, a "tidier" village is an unwelcome urban idea (and why cater to visitors, anyway)? And among those favouring action, there is little consensus. As well, the Cove's geography is quite constrained, and community-owned land and spaces quite scarce. And a general propensity to shop off-island detracts from the potential vibrancy and prosperity of Bowen's village.

Top Solutions and Actions

- 1. Create a more welcoming experience at the ferry, with signage and information, plantings and public art, to create a visually pleasing arrival to Bowen Island.
- 2. Establish an Ambassadors program, defining and reflecting our "spirit" and communicating it to visitors.
- 3. Offer more community events for locals, and more visitor-oriented events such as music festivals.

7. MOBILITY AND TRANSPORTATION

Root Causes

Transportation on Bowen is very limited. Without a car, or a regular commuting schedule, options are thin — especially on Bowen's hilly topography, with roads often unsafe for walkers and cyclists, and particularly those with physical challenges. The bus is limited, taxis non-existent, and hitchhiking is not for everyone. Solutions must be found so people can get around more easily, and participate in community activities.

Obstacles

A tangle of constraints means that few feasible solutions with any impact are readily available. For example, creating lanes for walking and cycling could lead to land expropriation and liability issues. Transit service, geared mostly to commuters, is subject to planning and business models that reflect that.

Top Solutions and Actions

- 1. Map non-commuter transportation needs (demographics, density, routes) with a view to improving service for people without cars.
- 2. "Bust" the car culture with an initiative to better connect existing trails, add bike shoulders in high density areas, and promote cycling and walking (especially to school).
- 3. Promote car sharing programs such as car co-ops (including neighbourhoodbased), offer safe rides home on a volunteer basis, and find more ways to share pickups from school and ferry.

(Update: An idea arose in the Vital Conversation to create a volunteer service to drive seniors to appointments. Recently, <u>The Caring Circle</u> created just such a <u>service</u>. And the <u>Bowen LIFT Facebook</u> website pairs up drivers and passengers.)

CONCLUSIONS

The shared love of the island — of its spectacular natural environment, and the passion and caring of the people — this is Bowen's strength. It is seen in volunteerism, level of civic engagement, pioneering spirit, zest for recycling, the amenities built over the years, and a strong sense of community and safety.

There was resounding support for Bowen Island's Vital Conversation as evidenced by the reports from every topic discussed, and by the post-event evaluations which were provided by over 50% of participants.

There is, in fact, a deep longing for more such conversations — conversations that would lead to greater consensus on specific issues and action on initiatives believed to be important for the long term health and vitality of the community. The desire to learn how to engage in positive discourse resonates strongly.

The need for a Community Centre remains a high priority for action. A gathering place to be used by all — for children to have room to run on long rainy days, youth to gather, parents to connect with one another, seniors to socialize, interest groups to share learnings; indeed, for all generations to come together, share a meal, and be a community. The general feeling expressed was that we need to define the basics of what is required, so that we can actually get a Community Centre built.

A Health Clinic is also a community priority, to relieve the pressure on residents having to go off-island for both basic and specialized health care services. This would be especially beneficial for parents with children requiring ongoing care and seniors needing periodic or escalating levels of health care.

Closely linked with a Health Clinic is a desire to address the needs of fragile people, particularly seniors who are less able to cope with tasks of daily living, as well as others marginalized because of life and health situations. Programs such as a Volunteer Drivers' Program to help get people around, a Lunch Program to provide social outings and publicly available washrooms including showers, are the types of things that could be contemplated. Though not explored in depth, the issues of affordable housing and transportation were identified as essential to socio-economic diversity, something long cherished but now being eroded.

Directly tied to a core strength is the desire to protect nature while ensuring access for all to enjoy the many dimensions of Bowen's natural environment — its shores, wildlife and forests. Key to the discussion was the appreciation that Bowen residents are not separate from our natural environment, but rather part of it. Learning how to create a healthy balance between development and protecting nature is an opportunity that would be embraced.

Opportunities to build a stronger sense of civic pride abound. The starting point is Snug Cove. A visible improvement through a concerted joint effort would lift spirits, and help the community approach other situations with confidence and optimism.

Getting around Bowen generally requires a car. Lack of transportation options limit ability to go places, meet people, and get to appointments. Information to address these challenges is needed, starting with mapping non-commuter transportation needs. Car sharing and car co-ops are options. Finding solutions to allow safe cycling and walking may require creativity, but are do-able. Overall quality of life could be improved, supporting a desire to be closer to the natural environment.

Though youth were not singled out as a demographic topic for specific discussion, there is strong concern that Bowen must better address their needs. Where are youth expected to gather in the evenings? What options does the community offer them? What would work? Ultimately, youth must be engaged in Vital Conversations about their needs, and the community must address what might practically be accomplished to help them.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Change takes time, and no one expects BICF to single-handedly address all of the needs identified at the May 31st Vital Conversation. There are, however, steps the Foundation can take to move these needs forward, by itself, in partnership with others, or by championing the work of others. Some actions can be started now. Others will have to wait for the appropriate timing or more resources.

Some possible immediate actions for BICF:

- 1. Post the full Vital Conversation Report on the Foundation's website, email the Executive Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations to all participants, advise invitees who did not attend about its availability, and generally communicate the report.
- 2. Share the Vital Conversation Report with the Municipal Council, highlighting the priority issues.
- 3. Share the Vital Conversation Report with BIM's Economic Development Committee, with particular reference to the Civic Pride discussion, as well as other aspects of the Report relevant to the EDC including the Health Clinic, identification of Bowen's strengths, and the discussion related to the environment.

- 4. Share the Report with the Transportation Committee with specific reference to the Mobility and Transportation discussion.
- 5. Use findings from the Vital Conversations as an essential background to Bowen Island Community Foundation's strategic planning.
- Adopt a value of building positive public discourse, weaving that value into the Granting Program, the Environmental platform (Maggie Cumming Legacy, Howe Sound Community Foundations initiative), and indeed all communications and other efforts.
- 7. In the case of the Granting Program, clearly articulate a desire for initiatives that support positive public dialogue.
- 8. In its 2014 Grant Program (and beyond) give priority to the issues addressed in the Vital Conversation, such as:
 - Help fund a Volunteer Driver Program
 - Give Youth a voice in the community.
 - Build community connectedness: places to meet, ways to socialize.
 - Pledge a Grant toward community education to enhance positive public dialogue, either through a Speaker's program or workshops to build skill levels throughout the community.
- 9. Host a Fall Vital Conversation on a priority topic identified by the May session, with a view to not only define opportunities but also move toward realistic action plans. If possible, partner with another organization, thus building capacity in facilitating such discussions as well as in implementing action.
- 10. When speaking with Donors, reflect the desire of the community for more positive public discourse about the priorities identified from the Vital Conversation.
- 11. Champion the Health Clinic initiative and the Caring Circle to build momentum for their work, as well as awareness of what is already available in the community. Should there be interest by these organizations, consider co-hosting a Vital Conversation to focus on specific concerns.
- 12. Recognize the supportive role the Foundation can play in a renewed focus on a Community Centre. The role could include highlighting its priority, facilitating discussions for the purpose of defining its scope, supporting fund raising, and/or assigning a Board member to a task group.
- 13. When work begins on a particular area, BICF must be sure to contact those who indicated that they would like to be involved in moving forward.

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