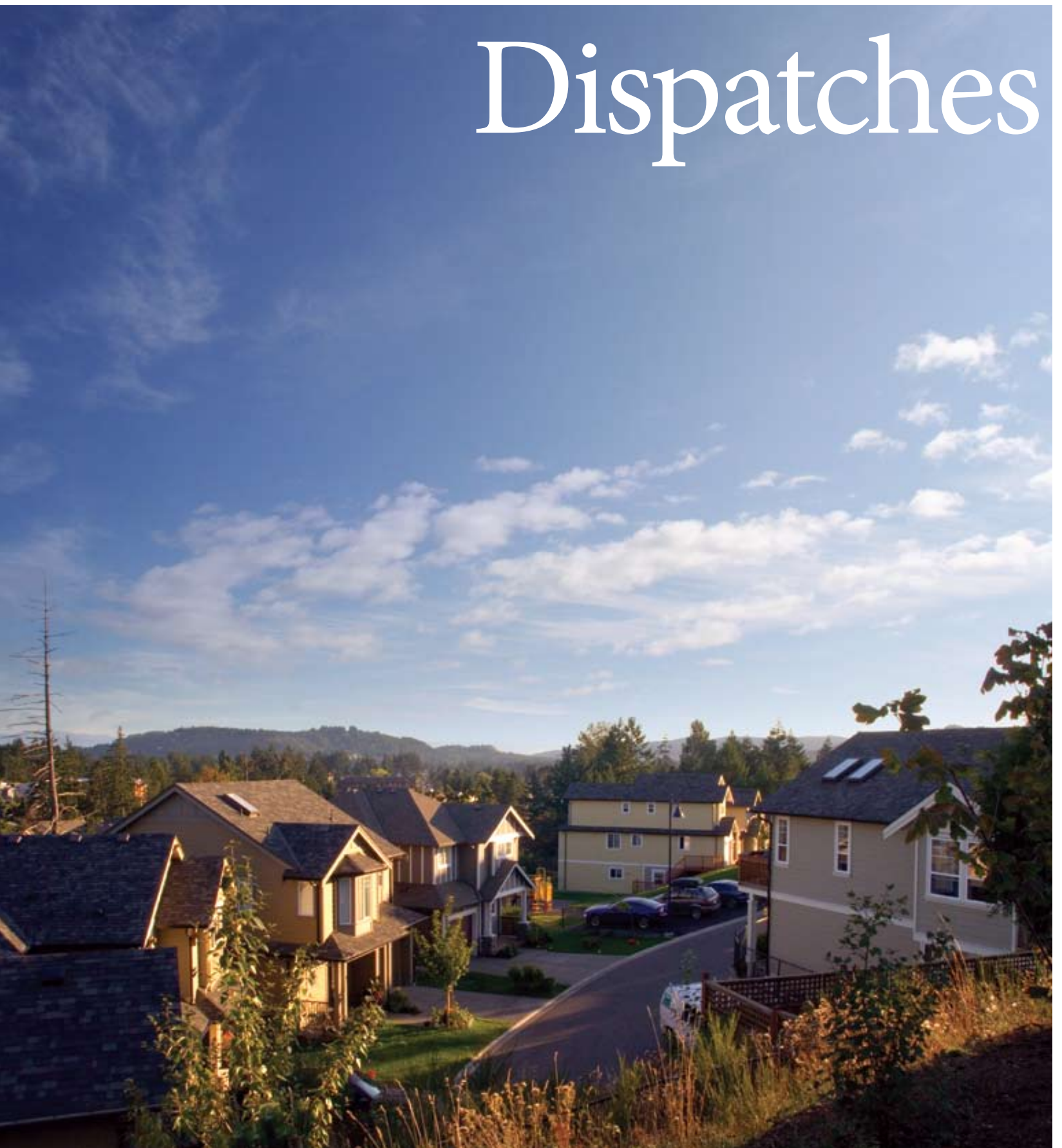


Dispatches



Langford

by Mike Wicks

Where do you start when writing an article about Langford? Its transition over the last fifteen years from a place that in 1992 had 25% unemployment and where people were leaving the community in droves, to one of the fastest growing municipalities in BC is somewhat of a fairy tale; and as with all good fairy tales the story would not be complete without a hero. Stewart Young (Langford's long-serving Mayor), of course, would never call himself a hero though, and quickly credits a wonderfully supportive, long-serving, council and a dedicated hardworking staff for the successes Langford has experienced over the last decade and a half. But it's hard to imagine that such an incredible turnaround could have been achieved without his vision, his entrepreneurial acumen, and his lack of ability to believe that there's nothing that can't be done.

A lot has been written about the man many people call Mr. Langford, so I won't go over too much old ground; suffice to say that he became a councillor in 1992, seven years after starting his own business, and a year later became mayor. Why would a successful, incredibly busy, businessman devote himself so entirely to his community? During a recent interview he gave me a simple answer, "It was time for a change, ninety-percent of the kids I went to school with left town, there was 25% unemployment, and there were lots of 'for lease' signs throughout the community; no new businesses were coming to town".

Indeed back in those dark days, logging and mining had all but disappeared; the community was getting little help from the CRD; there were no street lights, no sidewalks and no greenery. As Young says, "People forget, but we had potholes on our main street and maintenance wasn't getting done. The kids were hanging

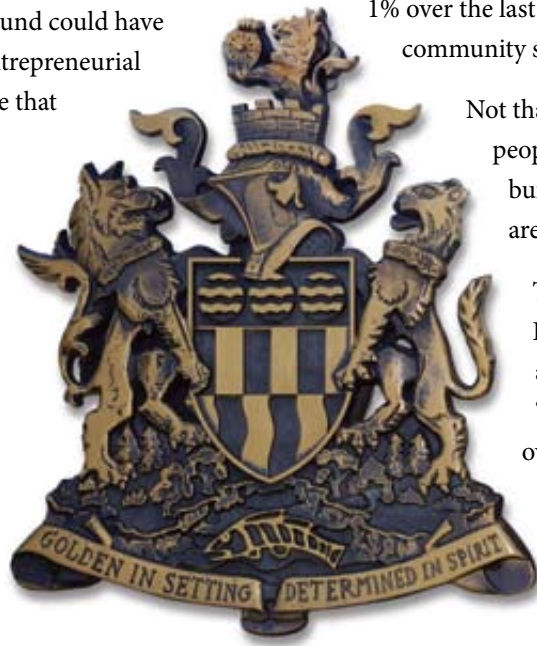
around the 7-Eleven, vandalism was rampant, there was nothing for young people to do, and at the same time taxes were going up six to seven percent a year." He goes on to tell me of the time he saw a youngster carving his name into a bench in what is now Veteran's Memorial park; he took the knife way and asked the kid what the devil was he thinking? Whether that was the catalyst that made him decide to change things, or whether it was just the last straw, doesn't matter. What matters is that he came to the rescue of a beleaguered town that had so much raw potential; he saw the diamond in the rough and found a way to make it shine.

In his first year as mayor he decreased taxes by 10% to encourage businesses to come and set up shop. His plan was simple, lower taxes, create jobs, increase recreational opportunities and beautify the place. As mayor, he felt that it was vital that Langford had the lowest taxes in the region, while at the same time demonstrating a higher level of fiscal responsibility. A brave move that delivered on its promise – in spades! In fact taxes have increased by less than 1% over the last fifteen years, in spite of a massive increase in community services.

Not that it was easy; it took him five to six years to get people to change their old way of thinking. But as he built a forward-thinking, progressive council (most are still serving today) things started to change.

The catalyst was inviting the Big Boxes to Langford. I asked the mayor whether this was a contentious issue at the time and he said, "The thing is that the concept was supported overwhelmingly by the community. Like them or hate them Big Boxes are part of the community – people drive a long way to visit them. None of the improvements we have done would have been possible without the revenues from the Big Boxes and, of course, Bear Mountain."

Today, these national retailers are part of the fabric of the West Shore and the \$2m they add to Langford's coffers annually, mean that the crumbling downtown is now rising like a phoenix from the ashes. In a few years Goldstream Avenue will have a village atmosphere to compete with the likes of Cook Street Village, or Sidney's Beacon Avenue. Already new upscale stores are opening, people are moving into beautiful condos at several locations along Goldstream; and Westbrook Mall is facing redevelopment with plans for ten to twelve story residential towers above a retail village.





Metro at Goldstream Station



City Centre Park

This live/work neighbourhood will be a reality within five years and fully completed within ten. Even sooner, the Peatt Road extension will link Goldstream Avenue with WestShore Town Centre. Add a bus terminal, and eventually a train station, and the dream of having one of the most exciting and desirable village centres on Vancouver Island becomes an imminent reality. As Young predicts “Goldstream Avenue will be one of Langford’s next big attractions.”

“Enjoy what we have – and it’s only going to get better. Come on out and take a look!

it’s created more than a thousand jobs locally, more than anything else. It’s put Langford on the map – it’s the single biggest economic generator in Langford”. I can see that he is passionate about the ‘mountain’. “It will soon have the first 36-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course in North America; how about that for what was a have-not municipality just a few years ago?” he says. I realize he isn’t finished, so let him tell me more. “Not only that, they believe in, and support, the community; they donated to Bear Mountain Arena, our fire department, donated land for a new fire hall and supported the trolley. Bear Mountain is an even bigger income generator than the Big Boxes and provides approximately \$2.5m annually in additional

What about Bear Mountain I ask Mayor Young? What about the protesters? He shakes his head. “A lot of people have the wrong idea about Bear Mountain – what they don’t realize is that if it hadn’t been built on, it would have been logged. Now it’s a phenomenal tourist attraction;

taxes.” He goes on, “The hard reality is that without the Big Boxes and Bear Mountain the 1% decrease in property taxes residents enjoyed in 2008 would have been a 5-6% increase.”

When asked about his ten-year vision Young answers, “I see Goldstream Avenue as a safe pedestrian-friendly place, with lots of people living right in our downtown core keeping it safe and friendly. I see a funky streetscape with coffee shops, a rail station where people can catch trains to downtown Victoria, and more importantly Victorians can come to Langford and experience a great village atmosphere, and then stroll, or catch the trolley to WestShore Town Centre mall.” He continues, “I see a can-do council, financial stability and state of the art recreational facilities; I see a well maintained beautiful place to live.” He tells me that he wants to make Langford exciting enough to entice business people to either relocate their businesses to the community, or to open a branch out here. Many already have, but he sees this as only the beginning of a long-term trend.

So really Mayor Young sees much of the same, but more so. I question whether, when he eventually steps down, this pace of change can be maintained. He is quick to tell me that “Politicians aren’t the smartest people in the world” and that it’s the people you surround yourself with that is important. “It’s a team effort” he says; “people want to come and work for the City; we get some of the best people approaching us. The reason is that we are progressive and encourage ideas from our staff – it’s a team effort. And it’s not just the staff, we have a great council and the community is incredibly supportive – we have over 100 local volunteers sitting on committees and assisting us

Award Winning Langford



Langford Lake

to make this community the best it can be, and to ensure that it's not just politicians making all the decisions.”

This team of councillors, staff, and community minded volunteers have been responsible for adding dozens of new trails and boardwalks around Langford's lakes; for ensuring that the city's recreational opportunities are second to none; that the new City Centre park is becoming a reality; that there are free all-year-round trolley buses for tourists and locals alike to go from one great venue to another; and for making Langford one of the most liveable places around. I asked the Mayor, if he had one message for our readers what would it be, he said, “Enjoy what we have – and it's only going to get better. Come on out and take a look”!

Whether you agree with Young's approach, or philosophy, you cannot deny his passion for Langford and the West Shore in general; he has changed the face of Langford and made it a great place to come to, whether you want to live, do business, work, shop or play. Asked what he likes to do in his spare time, he replies that he doesn't get a lot of leisure time, but one of his favourite activities is to drive around Langford looking for what he can improve next. Not a day goes by that he doesn't call a staff member asking them to make something better, whether it's a litter strewn median, some new graffiti (a rarity these days), or just a scruffy piece of land that needs some tender loving care.

Fairy story or not, Langford is a municipality to watch – you never quite know what's coming next; and that always makes for an exciting story! **WS**

Langford in 2008 is just so darn nice. Wherever you go the signs of a well kept community are obvious; the medians are tree-lined, there are flowers, hanging baskets, banners announcing the latest community initiative, and no graffiti. It's busy too. A few years ago the mall car parks were quiet, now they are bustling. There is an energy about the place, people look happy and the redbrick sidewalks, and decorative lamp standards that are a feature throughout the city are a sign of prosperity and pride.

Langford has a lot to be proud of. It recently won the national Communities in Bloom Sustainable Development Award as well as five out of five blooms in the national competition. Lest anyone thinks careful planning is not of paramount importance to this community, the city's planners will be more than happy to show off their Leadership and Innovation award for their Official Community Plan, awarded by UBCM (Union of British Columbia Municipalities).

It doesn't stop there, Langford is being recognised across the world for its work in developing a sustainable community and has just been awarded an international design award from the International Northwest Parks and Recreation Association for the design of the city's new multi-use recreation facility City Centre Park.

Add to this the honourable mention for the Canadian Institute of Planners, 2008 Award for Planning Excellence (in the category of housing) and the fact that the city is also a finalist in the provincial Green City Award competition and it's obvious that Langford is a well run city that is the epitome of sustainable growth; a balance of major retail with boutique shopping, high end developments, such as Bear Mountain, affordable housing, and the creation of a plethora of recreational activities for all ages.