



# **Building Better Homes and Communities**

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## **ACT Solutions**

### **New Approaches Create a Unique Model Ecovillage OUR Community Association, Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia**

#### **Issue**

One United Resource (OUR) Community Association wanted to create an ecovillage embodying four distinctive features: co-operative housing, a 'permaculture farm', an educational institute, and an environmental protection covenant to protect all sensitive ecosystems on its site. The group owned 10.1 hectares (25 acres) with rolling fields, wetlands, a lake, running water and plenty of room for building sites. To permit development that allowed all four features would require the creation of a new zone, the first of its kind in Canada.

#### **Plan**

Cowichan Valley Regional District agreed to work with OUR Community Association to develop the new zone, called "Rural Residential Comprehensive Development Zone". This zone would permit a combination of land uses and allow the creation of a multi-functional, holistic ecovillage.

The ACT project would also include construction of a demonstration building featuring

**OUR Ecovillage's demonstration building features cob construction, a green roof and an earthen floor.**

Source: OUR Community Association



an environmentally sensitive design and the use of natural materials, specifically cob construction (sand, clay and straw mixed with water), straw bale construction, rainwater harvesting, alternative heating/energy, earthen floors and a green roof.

#### **Project team**

OUR Community Association  
GreenPlan Consulting  
Cowichan Valley Regional District  
BC Ministry of the Environment  
Cowichan Community Land Trust  
Cobworks, Architect

#### **Results**

"Essentially, what we focused on in the ACT phase was the larger regulatory processes associated with land management design," says OUR Community Association Executive Director Brandy Gallagher-MacPherson. "From the local to the federal level, there were 11 regulatory authority agencies involved in this project."

Creating the new zone as a full-featured community was a significant achievement, in that it brought together people from within the environmental movement and

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those entrusted with upholding the regulatory process. Each carried preconceived fears and concerns, which were largely overcome through research, education, open dialogue, on-site open houses and off-site events.

OUR Ecovillage was respectful of all concerns, including fears that it would become a site for “illegal activities, transients, and youth who might be irresponsible”.

If someone had a particular concern, they were invited for a tour. Then if appropriate, they were invited to work with the design team to provide feedback and monitor the process. This contributed to a high level of integrity and credibility, and created alliances with members of the local community.

The jewel of OUR Ecovillage, beyond the success of attaining new zoning and a development permit for a non-conventional building design, is the on-site Climate Change Demonstration Building. This building in all aspects — the floor plan, the cob construction, the green roof and so forth — will serve as the exact model for the residential units to be built at a later date, possibly beginning in the spring of 2007.

The demonstration building thus far has exceeded structural expectations. It has also been highly educational in its use of green construction techniques. Regulatory authorities, including the local building inspection department, are monitoring the building through 2013.

“We have put together a business plan to do the next nine houses and develop a co-op for the housing group,” Gallagher-

***Alternative wastewater treatment, use of greywater and rainwater harvesting are key elements in the infrastructure design.***

Source: OUR Community Association



MacPherson says. “The biggest issues surround ownership, governance and financing.”

Innovative financing options had to be explored, because OUR Ecovillage’s structure did not fit even some of the most forward-thinking financial institutions’ ownership financing models.

As a result, the team is developing a unique financing model in partnership with VanCity Credit Union, one which Gallagher-MacPherson describes as “hybrid and holistic”.

The multi-featured mortgage allows financing for such eventualities as build-outs and additions, and VanCity Credit Union is willing to share the model with others. As part of this work, the team also initiated development of an economic modeling software tool that quickly formulates variables in the innovative financing plan.

Another element of the project involved creating a new type of land trust covenant. This covenant requires the landowner to be responsible for environmental protection of sensitive ecosystems, rather than placing responsibility with the Regional District, as would be the case under a conventional Regional District covenant.

Gallagher-MacPherson says the local government appreciates the new covenant, which is updated every five years, because it shifts the financial responsibility for upkeep and maintenance of the property from the taxpayer to the landowner.

Experts in alternative energy, alternative wastewater treatment and water reclamation have been contracted to design the infrastructure for the next nine homes and an extended community. This will include food and accommodation services, an unlimited number of businesses

related to agriculture, and one home-based business for the on-site community.

All aspects of construction, including the cost and effect of transporting materials and the use of salvaged and recycled material, will be considered as OUR Ecovillage strives to build affordable and healthy homes.

"This model has had national applications and has been the topic of research across North America," Gallagher-MacPherson says. OUR Ecovillage is being used as a blueprint by more than 40 other Canadian groups, even though the project has had relatively little financial backing to this point. "All of our work has been done at the grassroots using mostly volunteers and the ACT grant."

### **Related reports**

*OUR Ecovillage: The Development of a Model Demonstration Sustainable Village (OUR Community Association, Shawnigan Lake, 2004)*

This report is available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

### **Contact**

Brandy Gallagher-MacPherson  
Executive Director  
OUR Community Association  
[brandy@ourecovillage.org](mailto:brandy@ourecovillage.org)  
250-743-3067

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**ACT Administration**  
c/o Federation of Canadian Municipalities  
Tel: 613-241-5221 ext. 242  
Fax: 613-244-1515  
E-mail: [info@actprogram.com](mailto:info@actprogram.com)

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