



THE HEARTBEAT OF COWICHAN

When we acknowledge and value our region's well being, we are able to identify and prioritize actions that support and strengthen us as individuals and as a community. We have heard from many people that what gives the Cowichan its strength is found in the hearts of the people who live here, the rivers that connect us and the land that nourishes us.

Our People are diverse and acknowledge the unceded Coast Salish territories in the Cowichan Valley we call home. Indigenous culture is the foundation of this region with over 8,500 people identifying as Indigenous, representing over 10% of our overall population - twice as high as the average in BC. Today there are nine Nations in the Cowichan area including: Cowichan Tribes (the largest First Nations Band in BC), Stz'uminus, Lyackson, Halalt, Penelakut, Malahat, Ditidaht and Pacheedaht First Nations and Lake Cowichan First Nations. The land we live on is identified by the boundaries of the Cowichan Valley Regional District which encompasses the City of Duncan, Town of Lake Cowichan, Town of Ladysmith, Municipality of North Cowichan, and nine electoral areas: Cowichan Bay, Cowichan Station/ Glenora/Sahtlam; Saltair/Gulf Islands; Cowichan Lake South /Skutz Falls; North Oyster/Diamond; Malahat/Mill Bay; Shawnigan Lake; Cobble Hill; and Youbou/Meade Creek .

The word 'community' has many meanings, but at heart, it's about **Belonging and Participation**. The Cowichan region is fortunate to have 350 active volunteer-led organizations as well as strong arts, culture and heritage sectors committed to making positive change. In addition, over 70% of Cowichan Valley youth are engaged in volunteerism, play sports and participate in the creative arts, creating a dynamic and vibrant sense of community across the generations. In the Cowichan Valley we understand that working together strengthens all of us and have many success stories to build on including the North American Indigenous Games, the BC Seniors Games, and the National Aboriginal Hockey Tournament. It is demonstrations of such generosity and dedication that has made us successful in the bid to host the 2018 BC Summer Games.

We have been changing the way we look at what defines **Health and Wellness** in the Cowichan Valley and emphasize a wellness-based perspective led by the social determinants of health. Overall, our life expectancy in the Cowichan Valley is similar to the rest of BC, which has the highest

life expectancy in Canada, however there are several unique challenges that we face and which provide us an opportunity to do better. Evidence shows that comparatively, to the rest of Vancouver Island, we have higher rates of depression and anxiety (26.5% versus 21.3% in BC) , the highest level of relationship violence reported in BC (per capita) , as well as higher than average rates of teen pregnancy, preterm birth and low birth-weight babies. When we work to understand the issues we face in our community, we can define and take actions so that no one is left behind.

In 2016 Social Planning Cowichan signed the Cowichan Valley onto the Global **Happiness** Index, a survey that employs a measurement technique that asks people to rate their present, past and anticipated future satisfaction on a scale anchored by their own identified values. Relative to a global perspective, we are happy to report that the people in the Cowichan Valley are largely satisfied with our environment, community and government but we would like to make improvements to our overall standard of living.

Public Schools are at the heart of the Cowichan Valley; **Education** is where the future health and integrity of our community is shaped. The Cowichan Valley has 2 school districts servicing Cowichan: 19 elementary schools and 5 high schools, Vancouver Island University, as well as 9 private K-12 schools. Unfortunately, too many children in our community are facing significant barriers and inequality that impact their ability to engage with and receive quality education. We know that hunger and housing instability deeply impact the ability of children to learn. An alarming wake up call was delivered by the First Call - BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition in 2015 when the Cowichan Valley was listed as having the highest rates of child poverty in BC. Updated in 2016, the report found that although child poverty rates had slightly declined for our region by less than 1% (.7%), it still equates to almost 1 out of 3 children in our region facing poverty. The 2016 update showed the City of Duncan with the highest child poverty rates of all urban areas in BC at 31%. Once again it is the kind hearts of our people joining together to make sure that the basic needs for the children are given. Schools have been providing meals for many years to children and currently, two new local **Success Stories** have been added by caring community groups.

Economy and our economic health is a powerful contributor to the health and well being of our community. According to the 2017 Cowichan Region Business Roundtable the biggest impediments for growth we need to address are: lack of tourist accommodations, residential housing options, public transit and transportation was seen as an impediment to growth opportunities. A lack of affordable and mid-range housing was raised as a barrier to existing and potential residents. The top employment sectors are sales and service (24%), trades, transport and equipment operators (18%), business, finance and administration (13%) and education, law, social, community and government services (12%). In 2011 the Cowichan Valley Regional district has developed a sustainable economic development plan, which includes developing the tourism industry as a key component of the regional economy.

Rising income inequality and polarization has a significant impact on the health of the Cowichan Valley's economy. As incomes and income mobility stagnate there are poorer health outcomes which leads to lost productivity and higher health care costs. BC has the most unequal income distribution in the country and the Cowichan Valley has some challenges in this regard; 12% of residents make over \$125,000 and 26% of residents make below \$30,000 per year. **Housing** in the Cowichan Valley has been exacerbated by a number of barriers including: rising BC hydro rates, lack of non-market housing options and low vacancy rates. Nearly 30% of renters in the Cowichan Valley spend over 50% of their income on rent. This is why a living wage is essential to a robust economy. A living wage is the hourly amount a family needs to cover basic household expenses and the current living wage for 2016 in the Cowichan Valley is \$18.81 an hour. Promising responses include two non-market housing initiatives that North Cowichan has initiated with the Community Land Trust Foundation of BC, key to advancing the health of our community.

Our community's **Land Use and Built Environment** is directly related to the social, economic and physical health of residents. Local governments have responded with community engagement opportunities which have resulted in each area having their own official community plan. One of the most important ways we keep connected is through our **Transportation** network. The vast geographical area of the Cowichan valley, combined with low population density, means that the majority of people rely on vehicles to get around, while 6.5% of the population gets around on foot, 1% utilizes transit and 1% cycles. Recent news that Cowichan is set to receive a 15 million dollar boost to transit infrastructure is a welcome development considering that 72% of Cowichan Valley's greenhouse gas coming from vehicles.

Awareness about the impacts of climate change is bringing much more consideration to how we view and engage our **Environment** at a local level. The Cowichan Valley is one of the most biologically diverse and productive areas in Canada facing significant challenges related to biodiversity loss, water shortages, river droughts and rising food costs. Collaborative, locally designed and led efforts have been rising to meet the challenges we face including: Airshed Roundtable, Cowichan Watershed Stewardship, Water Resource Management, Cowichan Climate Change Collaborative and a Climate Change Adaption Strategy.

How does the Cowichan Valley move forward in the most effective way? By knowing ourselves better, acknowledge our challenges, valuing the opportunities they bring to us, celebrating our achievements, and strengthening our heartbeat.

