

Conflicting sectors discuss watercourse protection
District approach creates "uncertainty" for some, but is reasonable to others

By Reporter
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Conflicting segments of the community came together to discuss watercourse protection regulations on waterside developments during an invitation only stakeholder meeting held by the District of Squamish, Monday (Oct. 30).

While some developers said the district's hands-on approach leads to uncertainty, some conservationists said it just makes sense. Environmental coordinator Chessy Knight opened the meeting with an explanation of district's plan to protect fish and their habitat through a bylaw created from a hybrid of the now defunct provincial Streamside Protection Regulations (SPR) and the newly established Riparian Areas Regulations (RAR).

During a report to council Tuesday (Oct. 31), Knight said the stakeholder meeting generated positive comments as well as concerns. One concern arose from the district's plan to screen and review some of the reports that waterside developers must provide to the province through a Qualified Environmental Professional (QEP) assessment.

Jeff Fisher of the Urban Development Institute (UDI) said he fears QEP review and new district environmental development permitting may introduce too much uncertainty. He asked how the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) would sign off on projects.

Staff agreed that the district's next step should be to clarify responsibilities and information requirements during reviews, according to Knight. She said the bylaw would place greater protection on habitats of higher value and lesser protection on those of lower value. "It is not our intention to review all reports in great detail," said Knight. "The scope of the report review will be dependent upon environmental sensitivity of the site location, potential for impact to the site based on project type and design, and how the project fits into a watershed context."

Meg Fellowes of the Squamish Environmental Conservation Society (SECS) emphasized the importance of district review of QEP reports, saying that she believes the district is the only authority that can provide a local "watershed approach". Cumulative impacts on the watershed are an important consideration and a difficult one to assess, said Fellowes. One means of providing clarity will lie in the formation of an Ecological Review Committee which will consist of district staff, developers and the DFO.

The new bylaw adds new environmental development permitting on projects that did not previously need development permits, which brought up questions about additional time and complexity to projects. "In theory, it should not [add time and complexity to project review and permitting]," states a staff report. "It is thought that the environmental review will be concurrent with other project review processes. However, staff and council need to make sure that District resources are adequate to avoid project delays as a result of environmental DP [development permits]."

The public will have a chance to hear and comment on the regulations in an as yet unscheduled open house meeting.