

EKCP proposes \$20 property tax to town

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Published: **January 19, 2011 3:00 PM**

The East Kootenay Conservation Program (EKCP) made a presentation to the Committee of the Whole last Tuesday that stressed both the importance of conserving our biodiversity through private land ownership and introduced the idea of implementing a \$20 property tax that would help further local conservation efforts.

Wayne Stetski, Manager of the EKCP, has now been to all the city and town councils in the East and West Kootenays with this presentation.

Founded in 2002, the EKCP acts as a coordinator between different conservation groups that purchase private lands with a high conservation value. The organization's vision is to have landscapes in the Kootenays that sustain naturally functioning ecosystems that can in turn support economic and social well-being. The organization emphasizes that their approach is to coordinate and facilitate, not advocate or regulate.

EKCP has over 50 partners dedicated to conserving natural areas for Kootenay communities, including conservation and agricultural organization, forestry and business, education, First Nations, and all three levels of government. Some examples include the Columbia Basin Trust, the East Kootenay Invasive Plant Council and Wildsight.

"I think the presentation went very well. The mayor and council seemed quite interested in the concept," said Stetski, speaking of the possibility of introducing the \$20 property tax in Golden and Area A.

Stetski emphasized that if Golden and Area A were to implement a \$20 property tax for a local conservation fund, both public and political support would be needed. In the case of Golden and Area A, the easiest way to ensure support would be to take the issue to a referendum.

In a 2006 EKCP survey of 751 Kootenay residents, 96 per cent agreed that it's important to "protect natural ecosystems for quality of life", 89 per cent supported the idea of creating a dedicated conservation fund and 51 per cent supported a mandatory levy.

On November 15, 2008 the majority (54%) of Columbia Valley residents voted yes to paying about \$20 per parcel of additional property tax for a dedicated conservation fund. This created the Columbia Valley Local Conservation Fund, which covers Regional District of East Kootenay (RDEK) area F & G and communities in between, which is approximately from Canal Flats to Spillimacheen.

Up to \$230,000 is raised per year from this initiative, which was established by the RDEK and is administered by the EKCP. The money goes to either purchasing private lands for conservation or programs designed to further conservation goals. In March 2010, \$83,550 was approved for eight conservation projects in the area, which included initiatives like the Northern Leopard Frog Reintroduction, The Lake Windermere Project, the Columbia Valley Invasive Plants Neighbourhood Program and the Limber Pine Restoration Project.

\$99,250 was carried over and added to the 2011 funding.

So far, there are only two other areas in BC that have local conservation funds: the Capital Regional District and the Cowichan Valley Regional District.

“What makes our fund unique is that it’s based on a fixed amount per property and funds can go to the purchase of land, but also towards conservation projects,” said Stetski. “It’s a holistic approach to conservation.”

Ron Oszust, Director of the CSRD, says he will have a more in-depth conversation with members of the EKCP in the future to see if a program like this would be feasible in the Golden area. Included in this discussion, he said, will be the inclusion of what the CSRD is doing right now through the existing Area A Parks Plan, especially under the heading of Conservation Parks.

Mayor Christina Benty said that she “enjoyed the presentation and sees value in a conservation fund.” If the Town does participate in a program like this, she said, it would only make sense to do so with Area A.

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