



ILLUMINATING NEW ECONOMIC POSSIBILITIES

SYNOPSIS

Building on earlier Groundswell initiatives – the Defining Diversity: Creating Community educational workshop series, the January 2014 Groundswell Conference, and the ‘Let the Sparks Fly’ Powell River Living article series – Illuminating New Economic Possibilities engaged members of the business sector to share insights, experiences, and ideas about our region’s current and future economic wellbeing. This report highlights what we learned from that dialogue. The report is intended to inspire and engage local government leaders as well as citizens from all walks of life at this significant time in our community’s development; a time in which we recognize that all of us live and work on Tla’amin traditional territory and that our futures are interdependent. We are honoured to share this report with all three local governments: Tla’amin Tribal Council, the Powell River Municipal Council, and the Powell River Regional District. The report will be added to the Defining Diversity: Creating Community website and will be summarized in the Powell River Living magazine.

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Illuminating New Economic Possibilities

Illuminating New Economic Possibilities builds on work that has been developing through emergent design (Wheatley, 2012) over the last four years in particular, but over the last three decades more generally, beginning with an Asset-based Community Development demonstration project conducted in the region under the tutelage of John McKnight in the 1980s (see Kretzmann, McKnight, Dobrolowski, & Puntenny, 2005). Between 2012 and 2015, Vancouver Island University (VIU) co-led a participatory action research project in Powell River funded by the Vancouver Foundation which shed light on the roles of citizens in contributing to the social and economic wellbeing in their community. That project was titled *Defining Diversity: Creating Community*. A success of the project was that it sparked numerous activities that further engage citizens in considering our social and economic future. The final report made seven recommendations, many of which inform the current project. The report is available online. (<http://wordpress.viu.ca/ddcc/files/2014/10/DDCC-2-page-summary-FINAL.pdf>)¹

Two gaps that appeared in the previous research were 1) the understanding local residents have of their/our roles as active participants in local *economic* life (not just social life), and 2) the fact that the business community – while not entirely absent – was under-represented in earlier projects. For these reasons, we engaged *specifically* with the business community for this iteration of the project. Thus, the learning we share here does not replace prior learning or stand alone; it is most useful when considered in concert with what has come before. (Please see appendices A, B, and C for summaries of previous learning).

We invited interviewees from the Powell River Living series ‘*Let the Sparks Fly*’ as well as members of the Powell River Chamber of Commerce to join a learning circle in which they could share their insights, experiences, and ideas about economic wellbeing in the region. Fifteen business leaders participated in the learning circle which was audio recorded and transcribed as well as graphically recorded. While their perspectives are not generalizable to the entire business community, participants represented diverse positions within it, and thus shed important light on how we might consider our roles in the economic future of our community. We completed an initial line-by-line analysis of the transcript theming what was said about how economic wellbeing can be advanced. There is much of value in the summary; however what follows is an extraction from the learning circle conversation and data analysis that we believe provides useful perspectives for community leaders. We then demonstrate how these perspectives can come together to illuminate and inform our new economic possibilities.



Graphic record illustrated by Wayne Hanson. The graphic is posted full page in Appendix D.

¹ You can also find a full report and other information about earlier projects here: <https://wordpress.viu.ca/ddcc/reports/>

Participant Perspectives

Being deliberate about the pace and nature of expansion:

There was a lot of discussion as to whether we need to focus on one main industry or on supporting more, smaller businesses. Regardless of which side of this question people found themselves on, there seemed to be a shared interest in controlling the pace and nature of expansion. A priority for people who favoured industries (because they provide stability and good incomes for families, they support publically used infrastructure such as campgrounds) and those who favoured more, smaller businesses (because they enable people to build lives around their interests, control how the business 'shows up' in the community and support others) is preserving what is good and unique about this region. People talked about their relationships with one another, the pace of life, the quality of life, the beauty of the region, and the lower cost of living as all important to preserve. Participants also, however, talked about needing more people to come here – most notably young families, retirees, people with disabilities, new immigrants – to help keep the community vibrant and provide a strong tax base and market for existing businesses.

Therefore, regardless of what kind of development or expansion takes place, being deliberate and strategic about *how* it unfolds is key. Participants suggested **using policies strategically** to slow the pace of industrial development (while still inviting it) and also to remove barriers to new businesses operating in the area. Zoning, incentives, and other policy measures can help us direct the course of development in the region. This can help us value that the forestry sector and foreign investments (as two concrete examples) play important roles in the local economy, and support them and other sectors to develop in a way that preserves the 'flavour' of this region. It can also help us see that investment in every part of town and neighbourhood is integral to the long term vision.

Cultivating our medium-level and green industries:

Another way we can control the pace of expansion is by cultivating our medium-level and green industries, which adds additional benefits to the community too. For instance, rather than exporting wood that is logged, **value-added industries** such as saw mills, cedar shake mills, and furniture making can create more jobs in the region. **Agriculture** and **education** are also sectors that have the potential to create many well-paid and meaningful jobs for locals and newcomers, with an eye to sustainability. Importantly, nurturing medium-level and green industries can help us in times of transition that might be forced upon us by factors that are outside our control. These sectors can help the region gain a sense of autonomy rather than being subject to boom and bust cycles that are occurring on a broader scale. Doing this with intention also

THE LEARNING CIRCLE

On November 24, 2015, Powell River Chamber of Commerce members and interviewees from the 'Let the Sparks Fly' article series were invited to explore the following questions in a 'learning circle' (dialogue) format:

Understanding that the economy is created by a constellation of small actions taken by multiple players...

- 1) *What is it that we are already doing to construct an economy that enhances wellbeing in the region?*
- 2) *What more could we be doing?*
- 3) *Who are the players? Who is the 'we'?*

requires that we evaluate the impact of foreign investment.

Participants in the conversation held diverse perspectives on these issues. The intention was not to diffuse disagreement or conflict, but to embrace this diversity while still noting places of convergence within it.

Looking outside of our region:

This may sound contradictory to the local focus of our conversation, but it is a fact that many of the learning circle participants and others in our community rely on markets, work, or products from outside the region as part of our economy. How can we do this strategically? Using **the internet** wisely to market what we already have and do well can help either **attract people and investment** to the region or **create a market outside** of it. Vancouver Island was identified as a ready but somewhat **untapped market** we could be better reaching out to. Recognizing **remote work** as a viable way to make a living can help people and their families stay in the region – bringing outside money into it as well. This may mean travelling away for intensive periods of work, or working virtually from home. Balancing **short and long term** benefits when making decisions around how to engage our region with the outside world was also identified as important.

Keeping local capital moving ... locally:

In addition to bringing money in, we can do a better job at **mobilizing the capital** that finds its way into our region, in order to not only keep it here but keep it working. Generating local capital for local projects can help us support one another by working with what we already have. **Investment programs**, such as the Powell River Community Investment Corporation, are vehicles through which this can happen. Mechanisms such as **grant programs** can help with this effort as well. Local businesses can and do invest in other local businesses and in non-profits thereby supporting the economic fabric of the region. Educating people about **local spending** as a critical community investment is another important strategy. Ensuring we are all aware of the local businesses that exist can help us make choices that keep money flowing. *Powell River Connect* is a website that contributes to this effort but much more can be done to get us out of our silos and better **supporting each other**.

Not spreading ourselves too thin, or too thick:

The learning circle participants recognized that some of what might impede success of new or existing business/projects is **redundancy**. We have a small and relatively isolated community which means we may not have the capacity to support *all* potential businesses and projects. Creating the infrastructure to help people understand where the gaps in our businesses and services are can ensure **informed choices** are made about new starts. Replicating services (in both the business and non-profit sectors) creates unnecessary competition and challenges for even successful businesses. However, starting new ones that fill gaps can be an important part of a sustainable long-term business plan. Working to **keep existing local businesses relevant** to an ever-evolving community and demographic can also ensure we are meeting the needs of the region.

So while it is important not to spread ourselves too thin, **economic diversity** is still recognized as an important part of a healthy and sustainable economy. We need to be deliberate about our diversification: many things go, but not anything goes.

Applying These Perspectives

The purpose of the learning circle was not to reach consensus, but to elicit possibilities. Thus, while the ideas that follow emerged from our conversation, they may not be representative of the views of all participants. We do hope, however, that all participants recognize their contributions in the ways the actions are taken up, based on the new learning noted in the previous section.

Our intention here is to be as specific and concrete as possible so as to best contribute to action, based on feedback from participants in this and previous projects. While the specific nature of what follows limits its scope, we hope readers see these as *bold examples of* what is possible rather than the full extent of what is possible. We look forward to expanding the list that emerged from this conversation on the basis of more such dialogues in the community!

Farming and Food Production



Many citizens in the Powell River area have a growing interest in local food security. Whether that interest springs from a desire to eat well, concern for our vulnerability to increased transportation costs or concern that emergencies could leave our region with only a five day food supply and a current capacity to produce only 5% of our own food, this interest makes green farming and food production a **relevant business opportunity**. Farming and food production may be a good fit for many younger families choosing a lifestyle in our region that prioritizes time with family and time in nature over

high income. However, in addition to the barriers *all* local businesses face, just like in other regions of Canada, local aspiring entrepreneurial food producers are significantly challenged to gain **access to affordable arable land**.

Based on the themes identified from the learning circle a strategic plan to advance this social and economic possibility would include these elements:

- A campaign to raise awareness about the benefits that flow from shopping at locally owned businesses. However, it is not only up to consumers to think and act locally; local businesses must also be willing to adapt in order to remain relevant to residents as demographics and priorities of their potential customers shift. A commitment to the local economy thus requires effort on the parts of both consumers and providers and awareness must be raised on all sides.
- Support and mentorship for aspiring food producers to assist them to research and develop their business ideas but also to specifically ensure relevance which means producing food items in demand in Powell River at an affordable price.
- Networking with other businesses to create synergies, e.g.: sharing transportation costs, local food used at local restaurants.
- Local solutions to **generate capital investment in farm land**. This might mean actively pursuing innovative models. For example, educate arable land owners as well as those with venture capital in Powell River about the importance of sustaining a local food supply. Promote a campaign to gift, lease or donate land for local food production. This initiative is bold because success is dubious; however our community has great potential for innovation and new partnerships. In addition to our three local governments, organizations involved with food security, business development, land use, and land conservancy hold potential to design

something original if they can work together. These players may be able to develop legal mechanisms and other incentives to make gifting, leasing, or donating land more appealing.

- **Create incentives and reduce policy barriers** to the above local solutions, particularly when it comes to uses and transfers of land.
- **Attract residents** specifically interested in investing in food production. The current farming community is small and includes only a few young farmers.
- While we are clearly too thin in terms of local food producers, we may be at risk of being too thick in terms of individuals, organizations and groups concerned about local food production. Communication within these groups and between these groups that creates **receptivity to new ideas and nimble business development** will be important.

As most of the elements of this plan are very long term, Powell River may need to look outside our region in the short term and focus on advocacy with the provincial government for improved transportation options (frequency and cost) and on partnership with food producers on Vancouver Island.

Powell River Community Forest – Expansion

Another bold direction emerging from the learning circle is to explore the potential to expand the Powell River Community Forest to include some or all of the land currently owned by Island Timberlands within the city boundaries. The rationale for this initiative is that:

- Island Timberland declared their plan to cut trees on Lot 450 in April 2015. They followed up with a public meeting in November 2015.
- There is vehement local protest to logging the green belt in the center of Powell River and local energy has resulted in a delay to Island Timberlands plans. Now the Green Heart Environmental Protection Foundation has been established and has begun negotiations with Island Timberlands for the purchase of some or all of the land. Based on the amount of money required to purchase the Millennium park trees, though it remains uncertain as to whether this initiative alone will be sufficient.
- The City of Powell River completed the purchase of the Millennium Park trees but is unable to commit further funds. They are restricted in their legal ability to adopt by-laws or develop permits that inhibit logging within private managed forests. They are currently championing amendments to section 21 of the BC Private Forest Land Act that would make private companies more accountable to local authority and thereby to local citizens.
- Sino Bright is also interested in some of the property in question.
- The Powell River Community Forest Ltd. enjoys a positive reputation for sustainable forest management and is committed to investing in our community through grants and scholarships. They have deposited approximately \$ 5.3 million dollars to the community forest reserve fund which has been used for community projects aligned with our social and economic development. ² The most significant recent investment was the completion of the buyout and protection of the Millennium Park timber. These community projects are important because the

² Most recently the bike and skate board park, the elevator at city hall, the new ball hockey court, PR Search and Rescue base, the printing of the PR Recreation Map, renovations and improvements of the Villa Soccer Center, the Archery Club, the Academy of Music and the Powell River Curling Club, and the PR Brain Injury Society Community Garden.

municipal government does not currently have sufficient revenue from taxation to address these needs.

While many residents would like to see the trees protected, other residents are as concerned about maintaining a green corridor for wildlife, maintaining parkland for citizens, and maintaining our unique appeal as a seaside town with a forest in the heart of the city. If the Powell River Community Forest Ltd. purchased the trees/land then lot 450 and the PRSC lands could be logged sustainably and in a manner that maintained the wildlife corridor, recreational value, and unique appeal of the town. Management of the forest would be locally driven, create local employment and the profits from logging would be reinvested in our community and its infrastructures.

This initiative would dramatically expand the community forest and could create capacity for the cultivation of medium-level and green value added industries such as those described by learning circle participants as sites of significant but often overlooked economic potential for our community. Based on the themes identified from the learning circle a strategic plan to advance this social and economic possibility would include these elements:

- **Mobilizing local capital.** A unique business model that allowed for local investors (small and large) to generate sufficient capital for this purchase would be key. Support from existing local financial institutions with a vested interest in Powell River like First Credit Union and PR Community Investment Corporation could be explored.
- **Openness to new partnerships / working across traditional divides.** A dialogue with the Green Heart Environmental Protection Foundation will be essential. This dialogue could explore the potential for this group to purchase parts of the acquired land for community forest for preservation. Community leaders like Eagle Waltz and Jay Yule might be helpful in facilitating these conversations.
- **Recognizing the time for action.** The window of opportunity to initiate and get traction on this possibility is right now! Due to the complexity of the situation that window begins to close as early as May 2016 when decisions about the sale of land to Sino Bright will be made.



International Education / Education – Green Industry

International education and expansion of post-secondary education opportunities are already underway and hold potential as some of Powell River area's new green industries. This direction is generally viewed positively by the community because an influx of students and in some cases their families will likely fuel other local business, and may lead to further foreign investment in the area. This direction is aligned with the learning circle theme of looking outside of our region for new sources of revenue and investment but builds on existing infrastructure and assets. Developing Powell River area as an education destination is also aligned with attracting young families, families who include a member with a disability, and new immigrants; it builds on the community's reputation for meaningful inclusion.

Flowing from the themes identified at the learning circle, this plan would benefit from a **more deliberate review** including a thorough exploration of the impact of substantial and likely **rapid foreign investment** in a small community. As with any new industry, an analysis of the actions needed to

preserve what is good and unique about our region and to ensure no group or part of our town or region is privileged over another is essential as privilege is contrary to our espoused value of welcome and inclusion.

Sustaining the Local Businesses We Have

The learning circle perspectives also help us see what we need to do to sustain and develop the local businesses we already have. In particular, we can be more deliberate about how we attract or discourage new businesses based on their complimentary rather than competitive position within the array of businesses we already have. We can consider how rapid foreign investment might impact local businesses positively and negatively and ask local government to update policies, zoning, and bylaws through this lens. As a counter point, local businesses can review how they might increase their relevance for local consumers so that we remain not too thick but not too thin! They can also take responsibility for increasing the revenue and employment opportunity they bring to this area by considering up-scaling production and sales. The internet and Vancouver Island are two target markets learning circle participants named.

Invitation to Action

The perspectives and possibilities posed above bring into play some of the main themes and commitments that have emerged through all stages of our research. It is exciting that the values of this project reflect the values playing out in our region at this unique moment in history. It seems there is an unstoppable paradigm shift underway and momentum is building. These local developments align with changes that can be seen at provincial and even international levels of discussion in which the economy is understood in less mechanistic terms. For instance, Boyle and Klein point to possibilities for a moral economy, which is *“one in which people do not feel they have to sacrifice their values, harm human dignity or compromise ecological health in order to achieve economic security.”*³ We see the moral economy reflected in what this community has shared in all stages of this research, including the most recent learning circle with the Chamber of Commerce. And research participants have made it clear that they believe this community has the tools to make it happen.

First, there is an asset-based focus: building on what is working well in order to develop in areas that could use improvement. Starting with the assets (resources, qualities, skills, values) that exist in our community; we can equip ourselves and support each other to fill existing ‘gaps’ in our local economy. The dialogue reconfirms a strong desire to measure our quality of life by more than just income a trend taking hold across Canada. In Saskatchewan and more recently Ontario, a social outlook measure is used to track progress⁴ while Nova Scotia the Genuine Progress Indicator has been adopted⁵.

³ Boyle, C. & Klein, S. (2013) *Imagining a moral economy for British Columbia*/ Retrieved from <http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2013/10/15/BC-Moral-Economy/>

⁴ The Conference Board of Canada, *A Social Outlook for Saskatchewan*. Retrieved from http://www.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/PUBLIC_PDFS/SocialOutlook_Sask.sflb

With this asset-based approach comes a commitment to collaboration. This does not always mean agreement or consensus, but it means people who participated in all stages of this project including the most recent one emphasized the importance of increased openness, respect for our collective history and recognition of our diversity not only of age, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and ability but opinion! Openness, respect, and a commitment to work across our divides empower us to create a community in which all citizens can thrive both socially and economically. A willingness to reduce power imbalance among citizens by recognizing the essential contribution of all voices is timely within our current context of Treaty implementation, and requires of us a different way of working together.

Finally, participants valued the emergent nature of community life and in turn, community development and planning. All our interests are connected, regardless of how disparate they may seem on the surface. One success can fuel the next. For example, tourism can promote our unique relationship between recreation and forestry, and the reverse is true too. If we continue to think creatively, work collaboratively, and draw on our diverse assets we can not only realize the bold possibilities shared above – we may discover even more that have not yet come to light.

The City of Powell River and Tla 'amin First Nation enjoy a collaborative relationship and are working toward sustainable social, environmental, and economic development; they strive to use innovative approaches to improve the future wellbeing of citizens. This project supports those efforts and furthers the conversations in ways we hope will spark action on the part of leaders and citizens willing to try working together in new ways.



Graphic Credits: Walton Community Council / ABCD Institute / www.emergenetics.com / Blog: employeeinsights.com

⁵ http://rprogress.org/sustainability_indicators/genuine_progress_indicator.htm

Appendix A

What we learned from *Defining Diversity, Creating Community*⁶

Defining Diversity, Creating Community learning circle participants said that a community that is thriving both socially and economically: 1) Reduces the emphasis on material wealth, 2) Actively includes one another other, 3) Sustains and empowers youth, 4) Stays engaged and focuses on contribution, 5) Appreciates one another and celebrates even small successes, 6) Learns from history, 7) Is both multi-generational and multi-cultural, and 8) Shares a collective vision.

They identified the following roles for citizens in a community that is thriving socially and economically (rated in order of most to least mentions by participants): 1) Engage others and intentionally share leadership, 2) Take risks and let go of some of our fears about the future, 3) Make Powell River a place to return to; a place to call home, and 4) Take personal responsibility.

Participants in the *Defining Diversity, Creating Community* two-day course experienced measurable shifts in individual perspectives and roles – and increased responsibility. Collectively, groups felt better networked with one another and more able to extend their network. They felt energized and able to take actions that impacted social well-being. They articulated strategies for sustaining citizen contribution over time including sharing experiences and stories, involving aboriginal leadership and youth, centralizing information about volunteer and other opportunities, and continuing projects like this that shift mindsets. They confirmed that many small shifts and actions can result in large scale change and in fact we are continuing to see this impact rippling outward in our community.

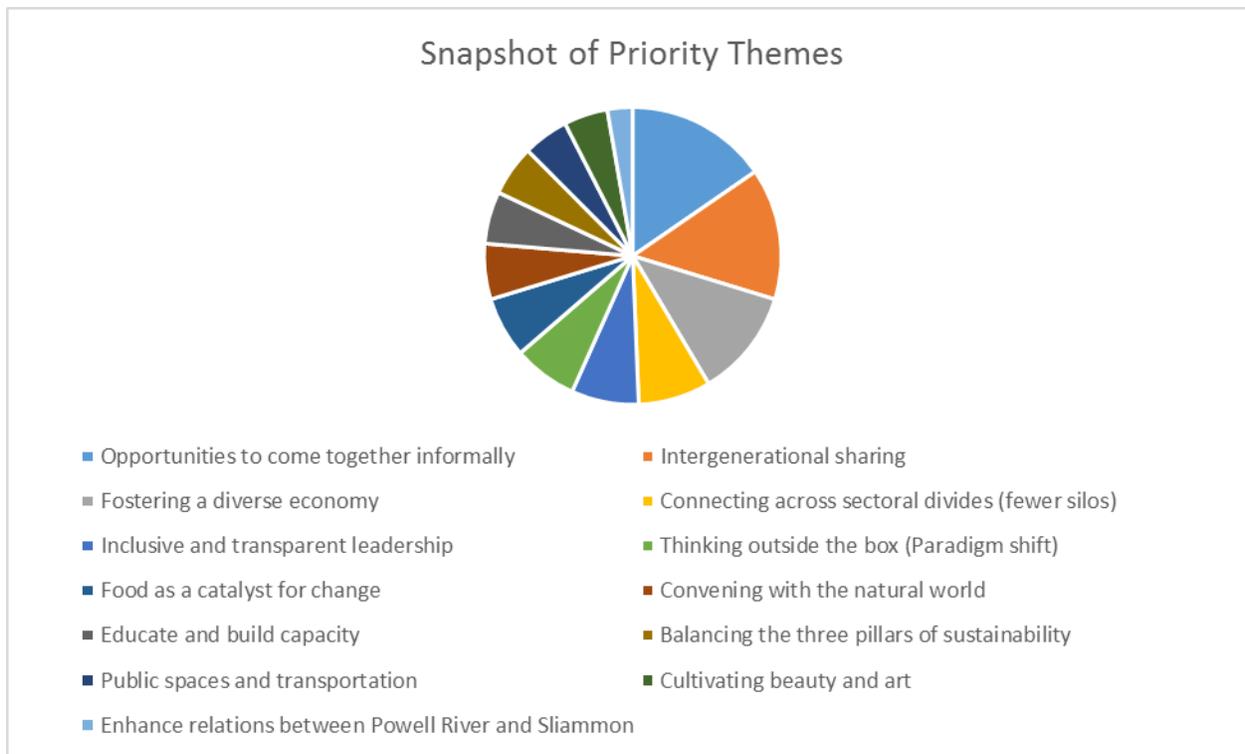
They assert that factors like inclusiveness, youth leadership, citizen engagement, diversity, and celebration are the hallmarks of a community in which people want to live, work, and raise their families. Participants are interested in a local economy, in local food security, in recycling, and in cooperatives. They see these as foundations for an alternative economy that compliments the more traditional development.

Participants share the city's priority which is to attract young people and young families back to Powell River. Information about living and investing in Powell River is available at the following link: <http://powellriver.info/liveinvest/>. In order to achieve this goal participants believe that leaders must intentionally engage others and share leadership. This involves taking risks and working in new ways with people we may traditionally have disagreed with or avoided. One survey participant summed it up this way, "In a smaller community if the power brokers are not invested, little will be accomplished."

⁶ For more detail, see: <http://wordpress.viu.ca/ddcc/files/2014/10/Defining-Diversity-Creating-Community-Final-Report-Final.pdf>

Appendix B

What we learned from the *Groundswell 2014* conference participants⁷



⁷ For more detail, see: <http://wordpress.viu.ca/ddcc/files/2014/03/Groundswell-2014-Post-Conference-Summary-Report.pdf>

Appendix C

What we learned from *Let the Sparks Fly*⁸

Interviewees were very clear that we are already doing many things that contribute to economic success in this region. Some of the things we are doing well already – and we could benefit from doing more of – include investing in people, investing locally, and thinking about long-term quality of life rather than short term profit. There was a huge emphasis on the ‘people’ side of the economy – supporting people helps individuals and businesses to support one another through partnerships, leadership, mentorship, and relationships. Interviewees suggest that what makes Powell River unique – the natural beauty and the lifestyle – are keys to our emerging economy.

There is a lot of overlap between what we are already doing and what we could be doing to further contribute to the economy. In addition to doing more of what we are already doing, interviewees also said that in order to facilitate positive developments, more must be done to eliminate barriers to local initiatives (including at a policy level), to support new and innovative initiatives, and to invest in infrastructure. They said we need to consider jobs for young people, how to bring money in from outside the region, and how to increase our commitment to clean industry in a meaningful way.

All interviewees were very clear that economic success is a collective effort. In addition to people (business owners, customers, mentors, service providers, and staff), the focus was on government at all levels – local, provincial, and federal. There are some factors that are also players in the local economy. Some are human capital (arts and culture, talented and inspiring individuals, friends and family), others might be classified as infrastructure (transportation, policies, suppliers), and others still are non-human (the beauty of and resources in the natural world). Recognizing all of these diverse players in the local economy can help us be thoughtful and strategic when illuminating new economic possibilities for the region.

⁸ For more detail, contact Powell River Living for complete *Let the Sparks Fly* interviews: http://66.147.244.243/~prliving/wp/?page_id=22

Appendix D

Graphic record of the November 24, 2015 learning circle, illustrated by Wayne Hanson



