

Chamber looking forward to commercial growth
Lake Country Calendar
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In the eleven years since Incorporation, it could be argued that little has happened regarding development in Lake Country. While there have been several subdivisions (The Lakes and Copper Hill), various commercial ventures (Cooper's Village Mall) and community development in the form of a municipal hall and Creekside Theatre, on the whole, not a lot has happened.

That is all about to change as two major projects are lingering on the Lake Country development horizon, both of which will have lasting social and economic effects on the community. These, of course, are the Town Centre project and 20/20 Properties' Lakestone resort project. In middle of it all is Chamber of Commerce President Peter Withers.

After growing up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Withers spent the early part of his career working for a mining company in South Africa, and moved to Vancouver in 1973 with wife Ann. There, he worked as a senior manager for several real estate development firms and eventually started his own consulting company.

He fondly recalls coming to Winfield on holiday in the 1980's and 90's with Ann and his four children, and says, "The Okanagan is the jewel of British Columbia... and Oyama is the Jewel of the Okanagan."

Withers, who is also the Development Manager for the 20/20 project, joined the chamber of commerce upon moving to Oyama in 2002 and became a board member the following year. When Leslie Kendall stepped down as president last year, the then Vice President ran for the vacant position and officially took the organizational helm in May 2006.

Withers sees a lot of potential in the Lake Country chamber. Not only is it located in a growing community, it is also situated between two thriving city centres - Kelowna and Vernon. "The District was formed to become a unique community," he explains. "The chamber is in the same boat."

He is pleased to see the organization has evolved from a small town business association into a fully-fledged member of the chamber movement. In spite of the chamber's growth, its goals and values remain the same. "The focus continues to be what it has been in the past," he explains. "We represent the broad interest of businesses in Lake Country."

While overall membership sits around 200, he says there is a core of about 150 who actively participate on a consistent basis. He estimates about half of all businesses in the DLC belong to the chamber, ranging from home businesses to commercial to industrial and developers. "It has very good connections and lobbying ability with various levels of government," he adds.

Some of the services provided by the chamber include insurance and employee benefits programs, business counselling and discounts for smaller businesses on bulk purchase items such as natural gas.



A member of the Chamber of Commerce since 2002, Peter Withers was elected as the organization's president earlier this year.

Graeme Corbett photo

The chamber also operates the Visitor Centre located at Gatzke's Farm Market along Highway 97. Withers is pleased with the centre's recent 96 per cent rating by Tourism BC. Grinning, he adds that the only reason they lost the other four per cent was because the worker behind the counter was eating an ice cream cone when the evaluators came through the door.

Another campaign orchestrated by the chamber is 'Spend Christmas in Lake Country,' which encourages people to support business in the community by shopping locally for holiday gifts.

One of the chamber's main social events is the annual Business Excellence Awards, which it hosts every fall.

One thing the chamber is really looking forward to is the Town Centre development, which Withers hopes will get underway sometime in 2007. Once Main Street becomes a reality, he believes the interconnection between the two ends of town will substantially promote business and "encourage the Town Centre experience."

Realizing Lake Country lacks both the infrastructure and population necessary to support the typical big box stores found in Vernon and Kelowna, he believes the Town Centre's niche will lean towards a wide variety of smaller commercial ventures. "As the variety grows and becomes more complex and established, people will be drawn to the area," he explains.

However, in order to sustain a successful Town Centre commercial core, he says it will be necessary to boost the local population. Conveniently, he is part of the answer for this as well. Deftly switching hats, he assumes his role as Project Manager with 20/20 Properties, and offers the solution.

With more than 1,300 homes scheduled for construction over the next decade, the majority of which will cater to those with disposable income, 20/20's Lakestone development will handily fill this need.

Well aware that the large-scale development has its fair share of local critics, Withers remains confident the project will become an icon for development in the Okanagan and, once complete, win over its sceptics. "The benefit to Lake Country will be huge if it is done right," he says.

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