

CEI PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

A glimpse of the future Centre of Excellence building on Okanagan College's Penticton campus; Right: Vernon environmental planner Brooke Marshall discusses how the city is approaching sustainability at a Wednesday luncheon at the Vernon Lodge.

Building a sustainable future

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It isn't easy being green – Kermit the Frog would have been bang on had he been talking about sustainable development, rather than life as an amphibian.

The movement towards environmental sustainability is gathering steam in all areas of industry, business and development, yet there is still much uncertainty amongst individuals and businesses who are looking to do their part.

The Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce, with sponsorship from B.C. Hydro, aimed to shed some energy-efficient light on the subject at a sustainability luncheon Wednesday afternoon at the Best Western Vernon Lodge.

A trio of speakers – Robert Parlane, an architect with the Kelowna-based firm CEI; Myles Gregory of Hydro's Power Smart program; and Vernon's environmental planner Brooke Marshall – discussed sustainability in their respective fields and offered advice on how people can get involved.

Parlane, who moved to Canada from the U.K. in 2002, is overseeing the new Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Building Technologies & Renewable Energy at the Penticton campus of Okanagan College. When it is complete, it will be primarily used for the college's trade programs.

"It really is the most inspiring aspect for the design team," said Parlane, of the students who will study in the building. "We've got an opportunity to really influence the industry throughout the Okanagan, and probably beyond that."

Similar to the principles espoused by LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), Parlane's firm is following design guidelines set out by a similar organization, Living Building Challenge. The aim is for the design, construction and operation of the finished facility to have as little impact on the environment as possible.

Parlane says the project is based on six "petals" – site selection, net zero energy, water, building materials, indoor quality and beauty & inspiration. The building will feature geothermal heating and cooling, natural ventilation, triple-glazed windows to mitigate heat loss, sustainable stormwater discharge, green roofs, solar power energy collection and a host of other systems designed to reduce or eliminate resource consumption.

Even though the use of pine beetle wood doesn't fall within the Living Building specs, Parlane says it was a "no-brainer" to use it for parts of the timber frame construction.

"We have all this surplus wood right on our doorstep," said Parlane. "The college is wanting to use this project as a learning tool. At the risk of getting a badge (accreditation), the college is still intent on using the wood."

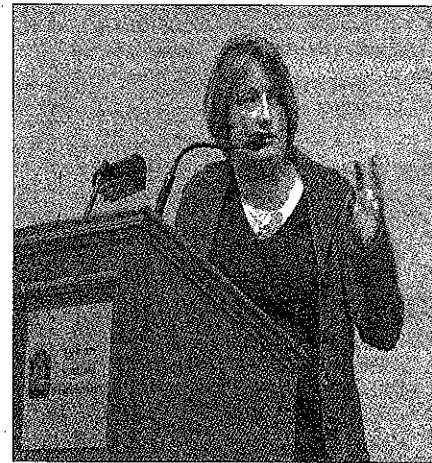
Constructing a facility with these state-of-the-art technologies is expensive – about \$300 per square foot – but Parlane says operational savings over the long term can help make up for it. And while savings in heating and lighting are quantifiable, he notes the benefits of improved work conditions are more difficult to gauge.

"It's hard to quantify, but if you're giving staff a better workplace in which to work, you get performance, better staff retention. The benefits are long term."

While Parlane is happy to see projects like the Centre of Excellence receive media attention, he notes that in other parts of the world, like Scandinavia, sustainability is the norm, not the exception.

"The Okanagan is lagging behind a lot of other places, and Canada is lagging behind other parts of the world," he said. "There are lots of technologies and lots of innovation here, but I don't see a lot of it being implemented."

When it comes to sustainability in Vernon, Marshall says



it is all about creating public awareness, whether it's a proposed development, land use issues or home renovations.

"It's important for everybody in the community, no matter how they see their role in the community, to get involved," she said. "The more input we have the more we're able to meet the needs of the community. Every decision that everybody makes contributes to the overall sustainability of the community."

Many people take a "why bother?" attitude because, as individuals, they feel ineffective in their attempt to do the right thing.

Marshall's response: "Your one ability to impact a solid waste stream by composting may not be that big of an impact, but if an entire neighbourhood commits to it, that has a big impact."

Marshall urges people to visit the city's website, www.vernon.ca, to see what is being done locally in terms of sustainability. The site contains links to external sites that will provide information on grants and rebates available for home renovations.

"We try to provide as much information as possible at every opportunity," said Marshall, "but feel free to pick people's brains."