

# “Hith Alis Lax Gwa-yas-dums”: Moving from CRISIS to HOPE at Gwa-yas-dums Village, Gilford Island, BC

## A Story of Comprehensive Community Planning

by William Trousdale, Jeffrey Cook and Chief Bob Chamberlin

An aerial view of Gwa-yas-dums Village in Gilford Island, BC.

### Summary

*Innovative approaches to comprehensive community planning and decision-making strategies can help First Nations regain genuine control of the choices that determine the quality of life in their communities and provide independence for the future. The Kwikwasut'inuxw Haxwa'mis First Nations is a case study of an award winning comprehensive community planning project that utilized creative and innovative tools and techniques, including a strong reliance on local knowledge and participation, to redesign the Village of Gwa-yas-dums and begin reshaping the future of the nation.*

### Résumé

*L'innovation appliquée à la planification communautaire globale et aux stratégies de prises de décision peut aider les Premières nations à reprendre véritablement le contrôle des choix qui déterminent la qualité de vie de leurs collectivités et assurer leur indépendance pour l'avenir. La Première nation Kwikwasut'inuxw Haxwa'mis est une étude de cas d'un projet primé de planification communautaire globale qui a fait appel à des outils et des techniques novateurs, y compris une grande confiance envers les connaissances et la participation locales, pour remodeler le village de Gwa-yas-dums et commencer à refaçonner l'avenir de la nation.*

### Project Background

The Kwikwasut'inuxw Haxwa'mis First Nations (KHFN) Village of Gwa-yas-dums is a small community of between 27 and 70 permanent residents located on Gilford Island, northeast of

Vancouver Island.<sup>1</sup> Once a thriving coastal community, recent years have brought on a number of urgent issues such as: lack of potable water (requiring the importation of bottled water); failing septic tanks (requiring ongoing pump-

outs); inadequate electrification (due to worn-out diesel-electric generator); and housing (mould, causing health problems). In addition, the KHFN face a host of interrelated social issues such as: lack of employment; an aging permanent population; a transient population (higher during the summer months); limited administration capacity; and a lack of comprehensive health and recreational facilities (fostering an environment for health problems and related social concerns).

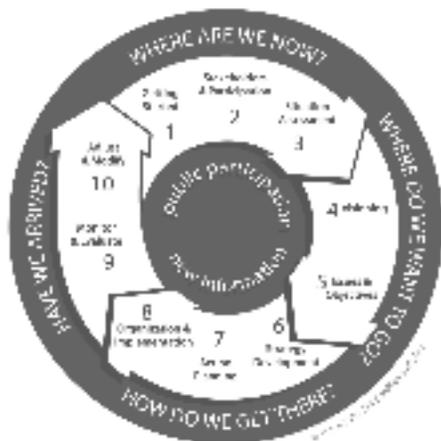
In a dramatic change of direction, the KHFN embarked on a process of positive change. In 2005, KHFN initiated a Comprehensive Community Plan (CCP) initiative based on an integrated and participatory approach, with a long-term, sustainable vision. The project's goal in the first phase of the CCP was to establish integrated and sustainable short-, medium- and long-term plans for four key areas: site planning, housing, energy and solid waste, while integrating ongoing engineering work on the water/sewer. The second phase of the

CCP is now expanding on the areas of community self-governance, culture, economic development, and health and wellness and lands and resources of KHFN's larger traditional territory.

### The Planning Process

The approach to community planning in this project was a collaborative, community-driven planning process. Working with Chief and Council, residents of Gwa-yas-dums Village and off-reserve members, local values and preferences were identified and used to drive the process, complemented by technical information provided by appropriate professionals.

The KHFN CCP process was rooted in a system of decision-making that first focused attention on important issues/challenges and strengths, then determined how to resolve or build on them. The approach was oriented around a 10-step planning process developed by EcoPlan International and then culturally adapted by KHFN, as illustrated in the figure below.



This provided a framework for action: a way to determine priorities, make wise choices and allocate scarce resources (e.g., time, money, skills) to achieve agreed-upon objectives.

The preparation phase of this project involved gathering a team of appropriate professionals and identifying the key stakeholders whose interests needed to be considered and incorporated into the decision analysis. In performing an initial situation assessment, challenges related to data and information collection were revealed.

In the next phase, a visioning process was used in stimulating and encouraging the process of value-driven planning. Through many meetings, interviews, surveys, study tours and four specific site planning workshops, a list of core values was generated. These values were integrated into every step of the planning process, guiding all aspects of decision-making.



At site planning workshops, a list of core values was generated.

In order to structure and facilitate the process, the results of the community input, including the individual site plans, were combined into four alternatives and illustrated. The ultimate goal of developing these alternatives was to expand the range of possible alternatives, make sure good ideas were represented, show that there are many form and character options for Gwa-yas-dums to achieve their objectives, and to provide a starting place for the series of design charrettes. The official community site plan, accepted by council in October 2006, is a vision of the way forward for Gwa-yas-dums Village, balancing immediate needs with a long-term, sustainable plan.

### Project Documentation

One of the challenging aspects of this project has been meeting the communication and documentation needs of all those involved. A balanced approach was required to address the dispersed KHFN citizenship living on- and off-reserve, mixed levels of education, and the need to demonstrate to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

(INAC) specialists (policy experts, engineers, economic development experts) that our planning is rigorous and complete, and that it underwent advanced decision analysis.

Culturally appropriate communication tools were essential for positive community engagement and project documentation needs at the community

level. A process title and logo was developed at the outset of the project to help create a sense of ownership and pride and helped to connect the project activities occurring throughout duration of the project. The title "Hith-Alis Lax Gwa-yas-dums" literally translates to "Make Better Gwa-yas-dums Village" but signified a much greater endeavour of community renewal, moving the Nation from crisis to hope.

Community newsletters, including poster-sized site plan options, scaled physical models and sketched visual perspectives all helped to document the phases of the project and decisions being made by giving visual representation to ideas and discussions among members. This helped to ground complex information and issues and to ensure that all members (regardless of education level) felt equal access to the community planning process.

### Community Impact and Implementation

Since community values drove the planning process within the technical

constraints identified by experts, the direction and conclusions are not only appropriate for the community, they are eagerly embraced and being rigorously pursued by the community. KHFN is moving ahead successfully with project implementation – prioritizing matters in need of immediate attention alongside long-term strategic plans. The completed Phase I CCP strategy has produced the following results to date:

1. Completed CCP documentation in site planning, housing, energy and solid waste management.
2. Temporary housing has been installed to provide transition housing.
3. Installation of a reverse osmosis chlorination system of water treatment.
4. Follow-up engineering work is currently taking place to develop a new subdivision.
5. Short-term energy solutions and an anticipated propane grid energy system.
6. Secured additional funding to do more planning and implementation.
7. Additional strategic level planning to ensure that Gwa-yas-dums Village relates to the broader traditional territory and economy,
8. Expanded key partnerships and linkages with the Canadian Auto Workers Union, Interfor (International Forest Products Ltd.), BC Hydro and Superior Propane.
9. Increased capacity to plan and analyze other strategic components of the community's second phase of the CCP now underway.
10. Raised local, regional and national attention in addressing community priorities.

### Innovation and Originality

The approach used was visionary, original and innovative in several ways. This was essential as initially there was significant resistance to change and a justified focus among residents on the urgent crises at hand. Therefore, the entire process had to be sensitively designed to move from the short-term thinking (fix the water system, fix the houses) to a long-term sustainable vision (health, economic development, culture, site flow). The process used several innovations to address these challenges.

### 1. The use of a learning-based partnership approach to achieve empowerment and sustainability.

A close working relationship and a two-way mentorship between EcoPlan and KHFN established a foundation for empowerment, capacity-building and knowledge transfer. Especially important were the efforts and commitment with KHFN leadership who was tasked with communicating planning output to community members on an ongoing basis, government officials and engineering/other consultants. This facilitation role is essential for turning the plan into action. Much of this responsibility and credit goes to the KHFN Chief, Bob Chamberlin, who continues to champion the project.

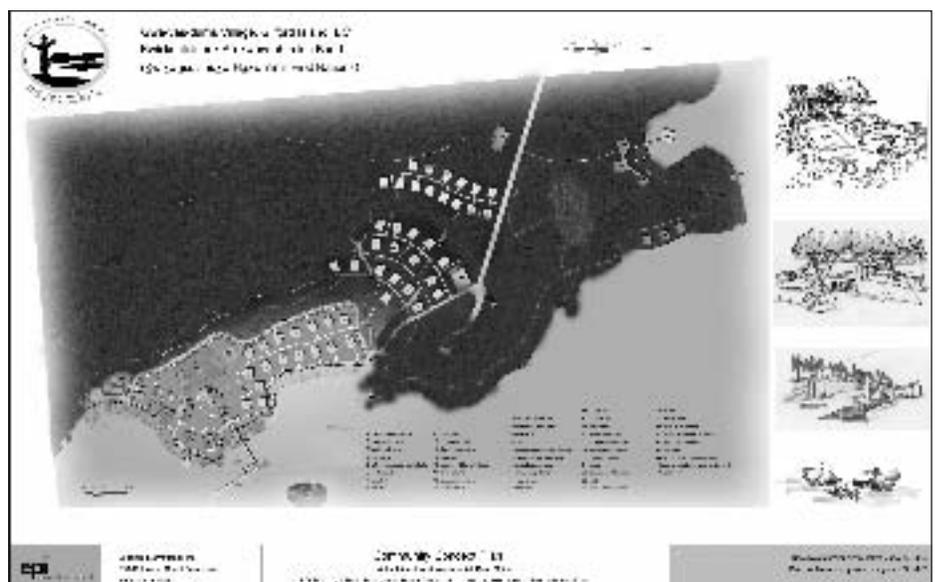
### 2. Preparing to plan and launching the process.

For the KHFN, the housing and potable water crisis triggered the need to undertake a CCP and prioritized what had to be planned first. Having a strong planning framework in place and a process roadmap that first considered the planning history of the community helped to begin the process of building community ownership and trust. The framework and process map also determined the sequencing of what was to be planned and when, who and how the community was to be involved, what the expectations of the CCP process were, how external planners were to be used, and the

anticipated timelines. It was quickly realized that the framework and process roadmap, including timelines, had to be adjusted and adapted continuously, and that a small group of planning champions was needed to keep the process alive and see the process through. As a result, the community's expectations were effectively monitored and managed on an ongoing basis.

**3. Process designed for change management.** Allowing the space, time and information for community members to envision a positive and new future required patience and process innovation. Through very specifically designed and timed exercises (door-to-door surveys, study tours/field visits, community workshops, newsletters and process logos and Kwakwaka'wakw mottoes) and cause and effect analysis, combined with the innovative use of internal KHFN agents of change/community messengers (in particular Chief, Council, local leaders, traditional Chiefs) over an appropriate period of time (project moved at the communities' pace) we were able to open a broad spectrum of possibilities.

**3. Use of innovative charrette tools.** This is the first time to our knowledge that a charrette approach has applied a broad range of decision analysis tools and techniques, from simple pros and cons worksheets to complex multi-attribute decision



Poster-sized site plan options helped to document the phases of the project.

analysis tables. These were culturally adapted to help navigate the difficult decisions. In particular, the use of a structured group decision process based on decision analysis and value-focused thinking<sup>2</sup> not only facilitated smooth and effective charettes and decisions, but promoted integrated planning that effectively combined facts and values. In addition, visual tools such as colorful and engaging poster-size site plan scenarios and interactive physical models that allowed participants to see in 3D all of the proposed options and tools brought meaning to the process of envisioning change in a community accustomed to disappointment.

#### 4. Designing effective communication tools.

The use of these decision tools also made it possible to design effective communication that could reach local residents, off-reserve members and highly specialized experts. In particular, including community maps and poster-sized site plan options, scaled physical models, sketched visual perspectives, and community newsletters in the process. Developing appropriate communications tools is necessary to keep membership engaged, motivated, informed, as well as to reward members for their efforts. They also serve to keep INAC informed and provide comfort that the community is doing things right.

#### 6. The use of oral and visual histories and traditional ecological knowledge in culturally appropriate placemaking.

Reaching into the photo archives, interviewing elders, utilizing traditional ecological and local knowledge in a structured way played a significant role in culturally appropriate placemaking and renewed sense of pride. These unique forms of research and analysis, often relegated to anthropological studies, are often not intentionally integrated effectively into planning.

### Lessons Learned

- **Consider the value of doing CCP:** Most importantly, CCP is a tool for governance and decision-making. Completing a CCP demonstrates that the community has a plan in place,

providing the community with a means to spread the joy, communicate its vision, build strategic partnerships and to facilitate results with a number of players. CCP serves as an important negotiation tool on a number of levels, for a variety of reasons and in a number of ways. Key to the value of an effective CCP is having a good planning product, combined with salesmanship, statesmanship and facilitation skills such as those Chief Chamberlin has demonstrated throughout the CCP process.

- **Building and securing reliable information:** When undertaking CCP, communities can expect a lack of complete, reliable and appropriate (geographically relevant) statistical socio-economic information and data to create a comprehensive picture of community situation. Throughout the process, communities should consider the time, budget and capacity to compile, administer, track and maintain information and data necessary to ground decision-making. If your CCP is directed towards physical planning, it is important to have the geophysical data and other constraints and opportunities in place before people are asked to dream.
- **Promoting community engagement:** Communities have to be open-minded as to who, how and when people may choose to participate, or not. Planning should offer many opportunities and choices for involvement, and ensure that safe speaking environments are sustained over time. In the case of KHFN, coffee table meetings and home interviews were critical in obtaining planning results. This face-to-face contact also provided people a safe “space” to speak about what they were feeling, and their ideas for change. From these one-on-one, personal sessions, results were brought back to the larger community and integrated into discussions to complete a community vision.
- **Ensuring implementation of results:** Efforts to put our CCP into action up to this point have involved a coordinated strategy to bring in the professionals and services required for the site development alongside continued lobbying by Chief Chamberlin

not only for government resources and support, but in championing partnership support with the private sector for accurate, long-term implementation of the site plan and related planning, as well. In the case of KHFN, CCP has been an opportunity to escape the dependency relationship on governments and to forge new relationships.

Furthermore, communities need to keep current on the appetite for what is “fundable”, and allow enough time to get all government funding agencies, non-government agencies and the private sector on side. This requires that communities have a champion within INAC who will ensure that they remain well-informed throughout the process. By knowing what is “fundable”, you can talk with the community about what is a “reality” versus what is a “dream”.

- **Plans can be changed and will change:** Completing a CCP does not imply that planning is final or completed, or that planning outcomes cannot change. Plans are not a “gospel” for Council. Rather, the community’s vision as expressed in a plan is an important guide and tool for Council to help secure or negotiate results. Plans should be considered a living document, adapted and adjusted accordingly, and be ongoing.



Coffee table meetings were critical in obtaining planning results.

### Closing Reflection

For the KHFN, this innovative approach to comprehensive community planning and decision-making has made a significant impact in terms of bringing the community together, increasing capacity and skills of strategic decision-making, facilitating change management,

ensuring implementation of prioritized projects, and securing additional funding to do more planning (e.g., land use planning, economic development and sustainable energy).

KHFN's example of integrated comprehensive site planning and the community's second phase of its CCP are generating interest and attention from other First Nations, government agencies, and various stakeholders groups from across Canada. Recently, KHFN and EcoPlan International were awarded a national planning award from the Canadian Institute of Planners and a regional award from the Planning Institute of British Columbia. ■

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**Chief Robert (Bob) Chamberlin** was elected Chief of Kwicksutai-neuk Ah-Kwa-Mish First Nation in 2005. Since that time, he has been actively involved in the community's comprehensive community planning process and pursuing capital resources and undertaking activities for nation strengthening and community development. Chief Chamberlin is a traditional singer of the Kwakwaka'wakw People and is also involved with digitizing and restoring recordings of songs and history. He can be reached at: [mooguy@shaw.ca](mailto:mooguy@shaw.ca)

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#### References and Notes

1. The number of people actually resident in the village varies annually and seasonally and is different from the INAC official resident figure of 66. Resident population has been in decline due to the unhealthy state of housing and water supply, also limited economic development opportunities and educational facilities.
2. For example see: Keeney R. Value Focused Thinking. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1992.



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