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Group started a revolution in thinking

Okanagan Partnership disbanding after accomplishing goal of getting businesses and organizations to think regionally

By **STEVE MacNAULL**
The Okanagan Saturday

After eight years of getting everyone to think regionally, the Okanagan Partnership is to be no more. "Most of the regional planning initiatives the partnership set out to accomplish are now in operation," said partnership co-chair Theresa Arsenault, a lawyer with Kelowna firm Pushor Mitchell.

"We felt it was time to wrap up and let the organizations and sectors continue on. The Okanagan Partnership may not be around anymore, but the focus it brought to regional collaboration lives on."

When it was set up in 2004, the Okanagan Partnership struck a chord with business and government because it was billed as not just an economic development initiative, but a quality of life initiative too.

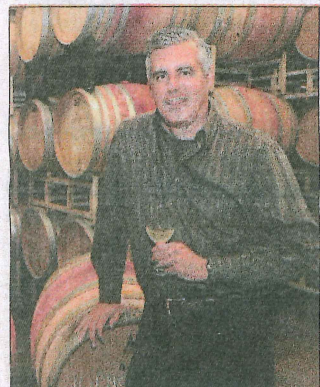
"At the time, it was a novelty to strive for both with the same organization," said Nelson Jatel, who was the partnership's first executive director from 2004 to 2008.

"It set the partnership up for success because it recognized that for the Okanagan, in many cases, it was the quality of life that drove the economy, not the other way around.

"Basically, we were just asking the question: How can the Okanagan be more globally competitive while maintaining its environment, water quality and quality of life?"

In 2004, the partnership was launched with \$315,000 in funding from the federal, provincial, regional district and municipal governments.

Over the years, government funding faded out and UBC Okanagan and Okanagan College kicked in money to keep the partnership intact.



Okanagan Saturday file photo

CedarCreek Winery president Gordon Fitzpatrick was one of the founding co-chairs of the Okanagan Partnership from 2004 to 2008.

The Okanagan is special.

With its stunning scenery, great weather and recreational lifestyle, it is a magnet for people and business.

In many cases, those people or businesses could be anywhere, but they chose the Valley for its quality of life.

Thus economy, environment and quality of life are inevitably intertwined.

By building on that basis, the partnership was able to pile up



GARY NYLANDER/The Okanagan Saturday

The Okanagan Partnership was novel in the way it linked the economy with quality of life, says Nelson Jatel, first executive director (2004-08). Brad Bennett, inset, of development firm McIntosh Properties in Kelowna was the other founding co-chair of the partnership. Then premier Gordon Campbell, below centre, was guest speaker at the Okanagan Partnership 2006 Economic Summit. He's pictured with Pushor Mitchell lawyer Theresa Arsenault and forester Nick Arkle of Gorman Brothers Lumber, who would go on to be co-chairs from 2008 to 2012.

the achievements.

The partnership was instrumental in UBC Okanagan landing engineering and medical schools; the reinstatement of the Okanagan Basin Water Board; the formation of the Okanagan Valley Economic Developers Association; got Valley mayors meeting regularly; opened doors with the Okanagan Nation Alliance; the arrival of high-speed broadband Internet; and cluster thinking.

Jatel went on to become water stewardship director with the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

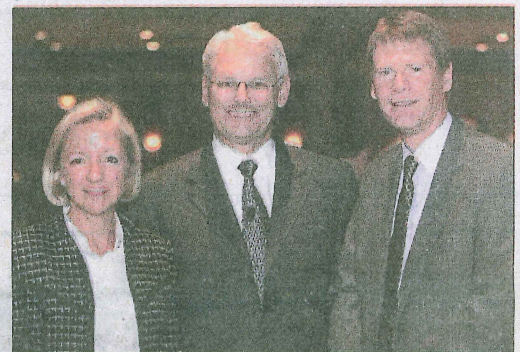
The partnership identified seven Okanagan growth clusters — forestry and value-added wood products; agriculture and value-added food products; wine and beverages; aviation; tourism; knowledge services and life sciences.

Getting movers and shakers in those clusters together sparked growth in those sectors.

While the partnership can't take credit for all the growth in those clusters, there have been many success stories, from Tolko and Gorman Brothers Lumber expanding Asian markets, and wineries opening left, right and centre to tourism becoming the biggest economic driver in the region and high-tech winners, such as as Club Penguin (Disney Online).

"The partnership operated successfully through boom and recession," Jatel pointed out.

"I think that shows regional thinking works regardless of conditions."



The partnership also lobbied for the widening of Highway 97 to make the route safer and better for residents, tourists and business to use.

Ironically, a transportation issue is also one of the unfinished jobs of the partnership.

"We wanted some sort of Valley-wide public transit," said Arsenault.

"I'm sure other groups will continue to work on that."

One of the latest initiatives is the shop local Our Okanagan website, where companies can list themselves for business-to-business partnerships and purchases.