

Lessons in conservation from Vegas

by Deborah Pfeiffer - Story: 84250
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Photo: Contributed
People attend special workshop

Doug Bennett, a conservation manager with the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA), was the featured speaker at a day-long workshop held at the Delta Grand Hotel in Kelowna this week.

The workshop "Water Conservation in the Okanagan: What can we learn from Las Vegas?" was put on by the Okanagan Basin Water Board and its Okanagan WaterWise program in partnership with the Irrigation Industry Association of BC (IIABC). The event was geared to those working in water-related businesses (e.g. landscape and irrigation), those who make and implement water conservation policy (e.g. local government electeds and staff), as well as interested members of the public.

"The stakes are high when it comes to managing water in the Okanagan," explained Water Board Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. "We have less water available to us than almost anywhere else in Canada, but we use at least two times more than the average Canadian. The Okanagan is one of the best places in the world to live, and if we want to keep it that way, we need to stop wasting water. Climate change and population growth are going to stress our water system in unpredictable ways.

"Nevada isn't everyone's first guess when we think about water conservation, but Bennett and his team have brought in some really innovative - and effective - solutions to address their water needs. Listening to what they have done, and drawing on the expertise of all the other workshop participants is what will help build a stronger, sustainable Okanagan," added Sears.

Indeed, the Okanagan and Las Vegas have a lot in common, noted Bennett. "We both depend on our lake for our water supply. We have a one-metre allotment we can access from Lake Mead each year; you have only about 1.5 metres that you can draw from Okanagan Lake each year. We both have tourism-based economies. We also both have super high demand for water in summer and lower demand the rest of the year, causing all sorts of issues."

The SNWA has tried various ways of encouraging conservation - some successful, some not. Bennett touched on a number of these examples, sharing the learnings of their experience in hopes of helping the Okanagan find its own solutions.

The Okanagan is in a good position to tackle these issues, Bennett added. "The level of momentum and stakeholder involvement you have is terrific. Too often communities wait for a crisis and then act radically and sometimes irrationally, and again sometimes without stakeholder involvement. But here in the Okanagan, you have people who are interested in the future of water which is critical."

Ted van der Gulik is chair of IIABC's certification board, senior engineer with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, and a member of the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB)'s technical advisory body - the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council. He understands that people are more willing to make the tough policy decisions when a crisis hits. "There are no naysayers when you run out of water," he noted. But this doesn't have to be the case in the Okanagan, he added. "Can we start down this path without a crisis? We can, but someone has to have the gumption to do it."

"I'd like to see an authority - perhaps the OBWB - take a lead, similar as to how the Southern Nevada Water Authority did it, and work with local governments to help standardize water conservation policies in the valley," added van der Gulik. "We should have standardized irrigation installation, xeriscaping standards, and a policy on what front yards will look like in the Okanagan."

"We can find solutions and be successful by learning from others like the SNWA, and by working together. Today we are taking another step forward in this effort, bringing together local governments, the business community, including irrigators, and the public."