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## Committing to a low-carbon diet

North Shore's inaugural Climate Change Café offers peer support

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It's the first real blustery night of fall and the atmosphere inside Bella Candela restaurant offers a warm, inviting retreat from the rain.

Tonight, the restaurant on Esplanade in the City of North Vancouver is hosting a private function. About 25 tables show the spoils of what looks to have been a hearty and satisfying meal. The last remnants of wine are being divvied up among guests and breadbaskets are being cleared. The crowd seems comfortable and satiated.

An Italian restaurant is not the kind of place you would expect 40 people to kick off a diet, but this collection of busy parents, mature professionals and semi-retired folks isn't here to give up carbs, but carbon.

Welcome to the Climate Change Café. The evening is the inaugural event of an initiative known as Cool North Shore, an arm of an independent sustainability advocacy group called Legacy North Shore.

Tonight's 40 or so participants have come to the café to sign on to the Low Carbon Diet, the centerpiece of Cool North Shore's plan to get residents to reduce their carbon consumption and talk to one another about climate change.

At the front of the room, Charles Holmes is preparing to speak, microphone in hand and power point presentation cued up behind him. He has the professional air of one who is used to addressing crowds, but seems to be vibrating slightly from a rush of adrenaline and expectation. Tonight has been a long time coming.

Holmes got the ball rolling on this project about a year ago when he was having coffee with Susan Haid, who works with sustainability for the District of North Vancouver. They both wanted to start a project that would engage North Shore residents in taking action around climate change, so they started brainstorming and playing with ideas.

About a week later, Haid came back and said the district could provide some funding. "I said, 'OK, let's start with a research study,'" Holmes recalls.

Holmes involved David Thomson, both had sat as directors for Legacy North Shore and stepped down to pursue the project. Their little research study has now ballooned into a pilot program spanning the North Shore that has peaked the interest of the provincial government.

LiveSmart BC and the Climate Action Secretariat have just announced they will provide funding, along with BC Hydro Power Smart. The province's newly minted Citizens' Conservation Council, an initiative pushing for community involvement in climate action, is also watching the program closely.

With their initial funding of \$10,000 from the District of North Vancouver, Holmes and Thomson hired two research students and charged them with the task of finding a program that was easy to use for average folks, not just seasoned environmental avengers.

They settled on the Low Carbon Diet, a program developed by David Gershon, head of a New York-based consulting group called the empowerment institute.

Holmes was first exposed to the Low Carbon Diet when he met Gershon in California on a business trip. Holmes was doing some sustainability work for Nike and Gershon was running a climate change café for its employees. "When Nike announced it, they had 220 people sign up in 30 minutes," Holmes recalls, "They now have 30-35 climate action teams that have continued."

"The thing I like most about the Low Carbon Diet," he continues, "is that it's really about community engagement."

The Low Carbon Diet comes as a small instructional book. There are three categories of carbon consumption and reduction: lifestyle, household systems and engaging others. The book outlines actions, simple commitments, like switching to a low-flow showerhead or eating more vegetarian meals. Dieters commit to actions that fit into their lifestyles, adding actions as they go. There's also a worksheet at the back for participants to calculate their annual carbon output.

"We looked around at a lot of other [programs] and we didn't think they'd be good for the everyday person," says Bryan Gallagher, a 22-year-old Simon Fraser University student and project manager for the Climate Change Café.

The fact that the Low Carbon Diet is measurable and trackable makes it ideal for public use, Gallagher says. The other important component, he adds, is that the diet is carried out in teams, a method based on research that suggests real, lasting change is more likely to happen within a supportive peer network.

Cool North Shore adapted the model for North Shore region and sent out invitations to religious organizations, local businesses and community groups urging people to form

teams and attend the café.

At Bella Candela it looks as if the modest advertising has paid off. The event seems close to capacity with tables full of chatting North Shore residents, but Cool North Shore's work is far from over. By the end of the night, Holmes and Gallagher are aiming to get each person to commit to one immediate action that will reduce his or her carbon output. The support teams will also have to schedule two or three meetings to add more actions throughout the next two months. Finally, there will be another meeting scheduled for late November to report the team's progress and provide suggestions for expanding the program.

If all goes well, Cool North Shore will host new cafés each month to kick off another group of climate dieters. The café scheduled for October already has 30 participants signed up.

The team element is so important, Holmes says, that everyone in attendance tonight has to participate. There will be no fly-on-the-wall privileges, not for district employees, not for representative from the provincial government, and not for local media.

So, as Holmes takes to the microphone, I sidle up to an empty seat and settle in to listen. But as soon as I land in my chair, Holmes has us jumble up the tables and breaks up the teams. There are markers and pens at each station and the tablecloths, I notice, are paper. Now it's our turn to brainstorm.

"I'm asking you to acknowledge that coming together in conversation like this is something we've done for centuries," Holmes says encouragingly, "And it's something that's been somewhat lost over the last few years."

It all reinforces Holmes' view that this project is as much about community as it is about climate change.

Behind him, a question is projected on the screen: What are your fears about climate change and global warming? Not surprisingly, there are lots.

My table includes Gallagher, the project manager and Joan Maurer, a District of North Vancouver resident who also sits on the Legacy North Shore board.

We exchange small talk, and then I dive right in with the big one: My greatest fear is that it's too late, that we're already doomed. I also worry that other people aren't doing enough. I mean, I can do my part, but that's where my power ends, or so it seems.

Gallagher and Maurer nod in agreement. "If you're a climate change advocate, you're kind of in a tough place," Gallagher commiserates, peering through his trendy clear plastic glasses. He takes a break from his role as scribe to steer the conversation away from overarching doom and toward a more manageable chunk. "What about this community?" he asks. "What are we afraid of on the North Shore?"

After a pause, Maurer pipes up. She's afraid of losing the green space and the scenery of the community she holds so dear. Gallagher fears for the ocean, that he will no longer be able to enjoy its bounty and depend upon it as a community resource.

We are all loath to give up travel. We discuss the environmental evils of air travel versus the undeniable benefits of experiencing other cultures as Gallagher draws an airplane on the tablecloth. But before we know it, Holmes is back on the mike telling us to shift tables for the next round.

Two of us relocate and one stays behind to interpret our drawings to the next group. The process starts again and similar fears are recounted and new ones added.

We switch again but by the time we get to round 3, everyone in the room seems to be fighting a collective anxiety attack. The volume is rising and people are gesturing wildly. We're certainly talking, but talking about fear makes climate change loom ever more like an apocalyptic inevitability. And here we are, doodling on tablecloths, but it does feel good to talk about it.

Holmes picks up on our palpable anxiety and gently coaxes us to switch gears. A new question appears on the screen: What makes us hopeful about climate change?

Admittedly, this is a more difficult task. Every hope my group identifies seems to come with an equal and opposite fear. But we dig deep and try to pull ourselves out of the cavernous pit that is climate change-induced depression.

"There is some benefit to chicken little," says Malcolm Chaddock, a semi-retired electric bicycle aficionado. He sees the rise of electric vehicles on the market as a positive side effect of media climbing on the climate change bandwagon.

Other beacons of hope include the Internet, for its wealth of information and ability to allow people to telecommute. Environmental legislation, bicycles, the local food movement -- these are all markers of progress.

By round 4, Holmes has us identify what we're already doing and things continue on a positive arc.

Sue Rowan, a Gleneagles resident put a clothing line in her backyard this summer. Lenny Fisher of the Mission Reserve started a community garden. I get around on public transit.

A light, continuous chatter floods the restaurant even though we're supposed to be taking a break. Eventually Holmes' voice rings out again.

It's time to really get down to business and start shedding those excess carbon pounds. The teams reassemble and everyone pulls out their Low Carbon Diet books.

Linda Vance, Robyn Newton and Ruth Sherwood are all on the social activities committee at North Shore Unitarian Church. They saw the invite for the Climate café and decided to form a team.

Newton and Sherwood tell me that Vance was the impetus behind the team. "As an institution, a business or a church, you have a carbon footprint," Vance says. She thought forming a team would be a good way to bring the dialogue back to the North Shore Unitarian congregation.

We flip open our diet books and peruse the lists of carbon sins and solutions, choosing our immediate actions. "I'm already doing a lot of this," Sherwood exclaims, but decides she will commit to parking her car one day a week.

Vance says she's noticed her curtains moving when the windows are closed, she'll work at getting those windows insulated.

Newton surveys the list and thinks she can change her driving habits, anticipating stop signs and red lights. She also mentions her teenaged son has been leaving his computer on all night to complete his downloads. I too am guilty of this sin.

It's one of those things I know I shouldn't do but just can't seem to stop. The time to change is now I decide. I will turn off my computer at night. In fact, I'll do one better. I'll unplug the power bar.

It's a small step but one I've been resisting for a long time. And small steps like that, Holmes says, are key. The group setting of the café helps people to take more and more of those little steps until they add up to something bigger. "There are some people out there who just don't know what else to do," he explains, "and there are some people who don't know where to start."

At the end of the evening Holmes seems excited but a little tentative about the evening. He says he'll be happy if he gets half the group back in November to report on their findings. He's under no illusion that this is the end of climate change. The important thing, he says, is to keep searching for solutions.

"We want to be careful not to give the impression that this book, or this group has the answers," he tells the dieters as they prepare to depart.

"But the answers are in this room, the wisdom is in this room."

The next Climate Change Café is scheduled for Oct. 22. Register via e-mail at [bryang@sfu.ca](mailto:bryang@sfu.ca).  
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