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- [Trend College](#)
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Balancing water, land use

By Judie Steeves
Staff reporter
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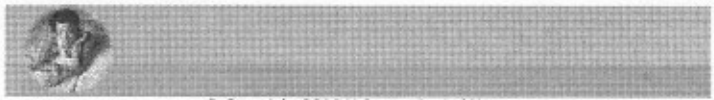
Land use planning can't be disconnected from water use planning, warns Kim Stephens, program coordinator of the Water Sustainability Action Plan for B.C. Stephens was the featured speaker at World Water Day celebrations at UBCO Wednesday. He talked about moving toward a "water-balance" way of thinking and acting in the Okanagan. People's transformation of the landscape has impacts on the natural water balance, he explained. We must move toward "water-centric" planning, where water is a key consideration, whether planning for a site or for the entire province, he said.



Sean Connor / Capital News

Kelowna Mayor Sharon Shepherd talks about preserving the Okanagan's water supply with a participant in the World Water Day ceremony held at UBC Okanagan on Wednesday.

As an engineer, he admitted to following new provincial guidelines several decades ago for design of wide streets connected to concrete gutters and sidewalks, which turned out to cause drainage problems in new subdivisions, instead of solving them. Today, Stephens said he realizes it's important to include moisture absorbing ground in such asphalt and concrete infrastructure plans. He called it "designing with nature," saying there is a need for a new bylaw for B.C. that will take into account the importance of environmentally friendly policies in development. For instance, he said there is a need to reduce the loads on water, waste and energy systems; protect and restore urban green space; aim for a lighter hydrologic footprint; increase transportation options; and develop compact, complete communities. Sustainability, he said, can be simply described as water out equals water in. Stephens noted Mother Nature's variability is not being given enough respect as the safety factor is shrinking. In 2003, drought, forest fires and floods created a "teachable moment," where people became open to considering changing their ways. More than 85 per cent of water use in the Okanagan is for outdoor uses, he said. Agricultural irrigation accounts for about 70 per cent and the irrigation of lawns, gardens and open spaces in cities accounts for 15 per cent. However, he said agricultural and urban uses are not in competition. While increasing agricultural water use efficiency can be used to offset climate variability or to expand irrigated farmland, reducing domestic use could permit an increased population to live in the valley, he said.



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