

Candidate Responses on Air Quality

Breathe Clean Air circulated a questionnaire on air quality to all candidates running in the Comox byelection in 2021. They were given a full week to respond and reminders were sent to encourage participation. Three of the four candidates provided responses.

The questions are below and the responses from each candidate are summarized in a table afterwards, along with additional comments provided by some of the candidates. Please visit www.breathecleanair.ca/Comox-Byelection-2021 for more information.

QUESTIONS we asked:

Concern about air quality:

Every winter, there is poor air quality in Comox due to high levels of harmful fine particulate matter. We experience multiple air quality advisories, and frequently break BC Air Quality Objectives. We are one of the worst communities of 13 monitored in the Georgia Strait Air Zone.(1)

In the Comox Valley, research(2) shows wood smoke is the source of most of our fine particulates (or “PM2.5”). Everyone’s health can be impacted by poor air quality, particularly children, seniors and people with pre-existing conditions. Studies show these particulates increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes, increase the rate of respiratory infections and lung cancer, impact lung development in infants and children, and much more (see Doctors & Scientists Against Wood Smoke Pollution at www.woodsmokepollution.org).

(1) See reports at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/air-land-water/air/reports/latest-air-zone-reports>

(2) http://breathecleanair.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/170317_CV_PM_Emissions_Inventory_Final_Report.pdf

Q. 1 - Are you concerned about winter air quality in Comox and how it is affecting people’s health?

Ensure multi-pronged strategies:

Wood stoves have been shown to contribute a significant amount of harmful pollution, particularly in older residential neighbourhoods in the Comox Valley.

The management of wood stove installation and use falls largely under local government control. Local governments can use a diversity of approaches to help reduce wood stove pollution.

For example, local governments can help raise awareness of the health impacts of wood smoke, support better incentives for people to switch to cleaner fuels, prevent wood burning on bad air days or at other times and, as Comox has done, disallow new installations to stop the spread of wood stoves particularly in populated areas. A range of approaches needs to be adopted to ensure success and to protect public health.

Q. 2 - If elected, do you commit to working to ensure meaningful, multi-pronged strategies for reducing wood stove pollution are created and implemented?

Q. 3. - Do you commit to keeping Comox's "no new installation" rules in place, to prevent the increase in number of wood burning appliances in town?

Appropriate solutions:

Research(1) in the UK has shown that even a brand new eco-certified stove, burning dry wood at high temperatures, will emit more harmful fine particulate matter per hour than 18 newer diesel cars. A government agency in Puget Sound showed(2) that a well-run EPA certified wood stove puts out 100s of times more fine particulates a year than a gas furnace or stove (and electric heat puts out zero). A recent report of multiple air agencies in the States(3) showed serious flaws with the certification process and raised concerns that new stoves may not be any better than the ones they are replacing.

Unlike all other heating options, actual emissions from a wood stove change significantly depending on how it is operated and some studies have shown real world operation results in emissions many times higher than a stove's certification rating. Few, if any homes, operate according to factory lab-testing standards.

Unlike any other home heating, wood stoves also lead to ongoing public spending for education on burning and also for enforcement (e.g. when people burn illegal materials or create large amounts of smoke). Research(4) has also shown that wood heating in the Comox Valley costs our health care system millions every year.

(1) <https://breathecleanair.ca/worse-than-at-least-18-diesel-cars/>

(2) https://breathecleanair.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/chart_circles.png

(3) <https://breathecleanair.ca/report-certified-wood-stoves-may-not-be-better-than-stoves-they-replace/>

(4) <https://breathecleanair.ca/annualhealthcosts/>

Q. 4 - Do you agree that replacing older wood stoves with newer, certified stoves is not an effective approach to improving air quality in populated areas?

Bylaws to protect homes and families:

Neighbours of wood stove users can be exposed to very different pollution levels as some burn wet wood, garbage or other illegal materials. Some also damp down their stoves, creating even more pollution.

Local governments have the authority to develop and enforce bylaws to protect people's use and enjoyment of their own property, and their health and well-being. This is done for noise and other disturbances.

Q. 5 - If elected, do you commit to ensuring there are workable and fair bylaws that will help neighbours protect their families and property from harmful amounts of smoke?

Candidate responses by question

Three of the four byelection candidates responded to our questionnaire (Steve Blacklock, Don Davis, Jonathan Kerr). Their responses are listed below, by alphabetical order. We did not receive any response from Judy Johnson (three emails were sent to request her input).

Question #1: Are you concerned about winter air quality in Comox and how it is affecting people's health?

Name	Answer	Comments
Steve Blacklock	Yes	My mother and I both suffer from asthma. Wood smoke is a concern.
Don Davis	Yes	
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	As a family physician, I see more of my patients having exacerbations of asthma and COPD during the winter months. Many of them have informed me that their symptoms are triggered whenever their neighbour(s) are burning wood. Having clean air is an important component to fostering a Healthy Community, Healthy People, and a Healthy Environment.

Question #2: If elected, do you commit to working to ensure meaningful, multi-pronged strategies for reducing wood stove pollution are created and implemented?

Name	Answer	Comments
Steve Blacklock	Yes	Education is the key. Public interest groups like this one are the 'experts', looking forward to hearing more about your research.
Don Davis	Yes	
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	Absolutely! I believe a combination of incentives, education, and by-law enforcement is needed. I also believe a new by-law could be set to require that wood stoves be replaced whenever a home is sold within the Town of Comox.

Question #3: Do you commit to keeping Comox's "no new installation" rules in place, to prevent the increase in number of wood burning appliances in town?

Name	Answer	Comments
Steve Blacklock	Yes	This is the best solution to the issue. A gradual phase-out. I used to jog around this town in the 1980's. When nearly EVERY house was heated with wood. The program is working.
Don Davis	Yes	
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	100% yes.

Question #4: Do you agree that replacing older wood stoves with newer, certified stoves is not an effective approach to improving air quality in populated areas?

Name	Answer	Comments
Steve Blacklock	No	Eliminating woodstoves entirely creates hardships for lower income citizens who rely on wood as an affordable heating source. Should we then provide gas or electricity rebates to folk whose only affordable heat option is wood?
Don Davis	No	
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	Yes, the science behind this is pretty clear.

Question #5: If elected, do you commit to ensuring there are workable and fair bylaws that will help neighbours protect their families and property from harmful amounts of smoke?

Name	Answer	Comments
Steve Blacklock	No	Wood smoke does not respect lines on maps. We eliminated back-yard burning and banned new woodstoves did we not? I support neighbourhood conversations and education. Legislating smoke via bylaw is an expensive and difficult option.
Don Davis	Yes	
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	Yes! The health of our residents and community depends on having clean air to breathe. I look forward to having the opportunity to support the work of Breathe Clean Air Comox Valley and the Airshed Roundtable. I invite you to have a look at my website (www.healthycomox.ca) to see my commitments to reducing wood smoke exposure in Comox, as well as my position on various other issues that are important to the health of our community.

Do you have any additional comments on air quality in Comox or suggestions for how we may effectively clean up our air?

Name		Comments
Steve Blacklock		I believe current mayor and council are on the right track on this issue. I have lived here since 1978. Smoke conditions are way less invasive than they used to be. It's about perspective. Education and advocacy are more effective than blunt tools of government (such as bylaws). Thank you kindly for allowing each candidate to share thoughts on this issue.
Don Davis		No.
Jonathan Kerr		I agree that a multi-factorial approach is needed including education, incentives, new by-laws, and by-law enforcement. Thank you for the work that you do in promoting clean air in the Comox Valley, and for providing this survey to the candidates!