

Candidate Responses on Air Quality: Town of Comox

Breathe Clean Air circulated a questionnaire on air quality to all candidates running in the local government elections in the Comox Valley in 2022.

This document shares results from candidates in the Town of Comox. Please visit our website at www.breathecleanair.ca for responses from candidates in other areas.

The questions and responses from each candidate are below, along with additional comments provided by some of the candidates.

Notes on the questionnaire and results:

- *All candidates were sent at least one reminder to complete the survey.*
- *Most candidates replied to the survey in full. A few did not, while others skipped certain questions. All questions to which a candidate did not reply are marked “did not reply.”*
- *Candidates who had no publicly available online contact details, or whose details could not be found, are marked as “no contact info.”*
- *Nicole Minions has been named Mayor of Comox by acclamation; nevertheless, she completed the survey, and we have included her responses.*
- *Candidates’ responses are provided in full and are unedited.*

Question 1

Every winter, the Comox Valley experiences poor air quality due to high levels of harmful fine particulate matter. We experience 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.

In the Comox Valley, we know 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).

Are you concerned about wood smoke in the Comox Valley and how it is affecting people’s health?

Comox

Name	Answer	Comments
<i>Mayoral candidate</i>		
Nicole Minions	Yes	Air quality is a concern for most residents, and there for a concern of myself as an elected official in the Town of Comox. It’s important to know and understand the scientific data on our air quality and the short and long term plans to improve the airy quality for all including our more vulnerable population and community.
<i>Councillor candidates</i>		
Steve M. Blacklock	Yes	
Don Davis	Did not reply	
Kealy R. Donaldson	Yes	I think it's important to recognize the impact that woodstoves have on the environment but this must also be tackled with other issues such as vehicle idling and industry pollution. The Valley is unique with this issue, being the low lying lands trap the smoke from woodstoves and other pollutions, making the air quality poor, during low pressure times throughout the fall and winter seasons. As I understand it, the count in Comox for woodstoves is quite low comparatively to Regional District areas and even Courtenay; with more education and awareness, I think citizens will make the right choice for the environment.
Peter Gibson	Yes	I have concerns about inefficient stoves and poor burning wood. In the rural areas, homes need to burn wood especially during power outages and cold snaps. In urban areas inefficient wood burning either with quality of wood or old stoves are a problem. Many people cannot afford the conversion to electric systems.
Ken J. Grant	Yes	

Chris T. Haslett	Yes	Though concerned about the how this is affecting our residents, I don't believe feel that there should be a ban on wood burning stoves. For many people this is their only source of heat and the stoves that they have in their homes are highly efficient. If properly maintained, wood stoves are great source of heat and keep the fine particulates down.
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.
Jenn Meilleur	Yes	
Ruby Sidhu	Yes	Air quality index in some of the zones where wood is burnt is really low compared to the zones where it's not. This clearly shows that wood burning has a big impact, and we should look into other cleaner resources for energy. I will work towards setting up a rebate program for changing the existing wood burners to heat pumps.
Maureen Swift	Yes	

Question 2

Mobile air monitoring studies in our area have shown that older neighbourhoods (where wood stove use is typically higher) experience the worst air quality in the Valley. Some areas showed poorer air quality than what was recorded at the government monitor at Courtenay Elementary School.

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 incentives for people to switch to cleaner fuels, prevent wood burning on bad air days, disallow new installations to stop the spread of wood stoves particularly in populated areas, and more. A range of approaches needs to be adopted to ensure success.

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

Comox

Name	Answer	Comments
<i>Mayoral candidate</i>		
Nicole Minions	Yes	
<i>Councillor candidates</i>		
Steve M. Blacklock	Yes	
Don Davis	Did not reply	
Kealy R. Donaldson	Yes	I believe a strong, overall strategy should be focused on to reduce all emissions, including wood stove pollution. The federal government has put a well balanced Emissions Reduction Plan in place, with a target timeline of 2030 for a 40% overall reduction and a net zero for 2050. While this plan primarily focuses on reducing industry emissions, it ties into promoting education and awareness that will directly impact decisions on wood stove pollution at the municipal level.
Peter Gibson	Yes	Science based programs in high density areas are needed. Incentives for conversion will be a must. Rural needs must be recognized.
Ken J. Grant	Yes	We do not allow wood stove installation in new construction in Comox
Chris T. Haslett	Yes	At this time, the Comox council does not have new builds with wood stoves. I would work to help educate those with wood stoves to do proper maintenance as well as updates to ensure that they are burning clean seasoned wood to keep down air pollution.

Jonathan Kerr	Yes	Yes, I agree that a multi-factorial approach is needed including education, incentives, new by-laws, and by-law enforcement. With respect to education, for those currently using wood stoves, we should encourage the use of dry wood so that those with lung conditions are less affected by the smoke. We should also limit wood burning on bad air days, when our lung health is already at risk. For those burning wood because it is their most affordable heating option, we should advocate for and provide financial incentives to help people make the switch from wood to healthier forms of heat. For example, incentives to install a heat pump could be provided which would allow for a healthier form of heat during the winter, while also providing air conditioning during the summer, increasing safety and security during extreme heat waves.
Jenn Meilleur	Yes	The wood smoke issues is part of a broader issue around many people not having access to affordable and clean heating and cooling options for their home - some people can't afford the high cost of baseboard heating and also can't afford to have a heat pump installed. Heat pumps provide more affordable heating and also air conditioning in the summer. This is becoming more urgent and important as we experience more frequent and extreme climate-related weather events - like the extreme cold last winter and the heat dome a year ago. It is the most vulnerable people in our communities who are impacted the most from events like these. To help address this issue of affordability and access, I support innovative financing programs like the Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) program. This program provides access to long-term financing for energy efficiency, water conservation, renewable energy, and resiliency measures for owners and developers of residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, and multifamily properties. Everybody deserves to have safe, clean, and affordable heating and cooling options in their home.
Ruby Sidhu	Yes	Already existing wood stoves should use only certified dry wood, which can be included in regulations. Rebate programs should be activated from town and province to get them replaced.
Maureen Swift	Yes	

Question 3

A wood stove, even when it is new and run perfectly, will put out far more fine particulate matter than any other source of home heating. A government agency in Puget Sound indicates that a well-run EPA certified wood stove puts out 582 times more fine particulates a year than a gas furnace or stove. Research 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, all in one fixed location.

This means people living near wood stoves, especially in more densely populated areas, are exposed to far more fine particulate matter than people living near other types of heat. Health experts say there is no safe level of exposure to fine particulate matter and that any reduction will reduce health impacts.

In 2021, CVRD convened the multi-stakeholder Airshed Roundtable to develop and implement a Regional Airshed Protection Strategy to guide air quality actions. To help protect public health, one of the main actions in the draft plan is to transition homes in populated areas away from using wood heating.

Do you agree that we need to work towards transitioning homes in populated areas away from using wood stoves (except in emergencies)?

Comox

Name	Answer	Comments
<i>Mayoral candidate</i>		
Nicole Minions	Yes	Yes but in a very long term and collaborative plan. Wood burning appliances have been used as an economic way to heat homes for many generations and it's a slow shift based on access to more efficient and desired heating options. It is not something that can be done quickly or by force without buy-in overall and a collaborative approach with all stakeholders. Intentional long-term change with individual buy in is the best path forward.
<i>Councillor candidates</i>		
Steve M. Blacklock	Yes	However, I have concerns about homes that rely on woodstove as an only heat source and homes with insufficient electrical capacity to upgrade to electric heat pump.
Don Davis	Did not reply	
Kealy R. Donaldson	Yes	Yes, I agree with working towards this transition but we must keep in mind the state of our economy and the expense for some families / households to make this change. Further incentives should be offered to help those who may face economic challenges in adopting this change.
Peter Gibson	Yes	

Ken J. Grant	Yes	Heat pumps are better for most installation in Comox. However there are some homes that are not well suited for heat pumps and are still using old non efficient wood stoves. It makes sense to me that in those cases a high efficiency wood stove would be a good alternative as they are far more efficient than the old ones. Homes with 70 amp services are hard to retro fit with heat pumps and even with the rebates are very expensive leaving people to keep the old wood stove.
Chris T. Haslett	Yes	When homes are being updated and renovated it makes it easier to update the heating and we should work with builders to educate our residents. I do believe that for some this is their only source of heat and to work to take it away would cause considerably more stress on these families in a climate that is already extremely expensive. The cost to update heating can be very large even after rebates and simply isn't possible for some.
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	The Town of Comox already prohibits the installation of wood stoves in new homes and during home renovations. We could also consider creating a new by-law which would require that wood stoves be replaced whenever a home is sold within the Town of Comox. While I don't think it would be right for us to force people to remove their wood stoves, these combined measures would allow for the gradual phase-out of wood-burning appliances over time and an improvement in air quality.
Jenn Meilleur	Yes	
Ruby Sidhu	Yes	Changing them to new energy efficient resources is the only option we have to move forward.
Maureen Swift	Yes	

Question 4

Individuals who burn wet wood or other illegal materials, or who do not use their stove appropriately, will create notably more smoke pollution than people who burn dry wood in hot fires. Neighbours of wood stove users can be exposed to very different pollution levels.

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. They also have authority to regulate wood stove use.

If elected, do you commit to ensuring there are workable and fair bylaws that will help neighbours protect their families and property from harmful wood smoke?

Comox

Name	Answer	Comments
<i>Mayoral candidate</i>		
Nicole Minions	Yes	
<i>Councillor candidates</i>		
Steve M. Blacklock	Yes	
Don Davis	Did not reply	
Kealy R. Donaldson	Yes	We need a regional approach for this focus in the Comox Valley; it's important that all Municipalities and Regional District Areas are on board, with support from Provincial and Federal levels.
Peter Gibson	Yes	Again, there is a difference between rural and urban wood burning. Chances of power outages great in low population areas.
Ken J. Grant	Yes	I think that education is a good way to inform people about proper burning
Chris T. Haslett	Yes	New and efficient wood stoves have their place and are a great source of heat. I would ensure fair bylaws and work with all residents of Comox.
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	Yes, we should have fair bylaws that promote the health of our community. The health of our residents and community depends on having clean air to breathe. We could also encourage wood burners to use wood moisture meters to ensure their wood is dry before burning. We could also consider creating a community source of dry wood for people to purchase.
Jenn Meilleur	Yes	
Ruby Sidhu	Yes	
Maureen Swift	Yes	

Question 5

To help ensure the wood smoke problem did not get any worse, all three municipalities passed bylaws in the last few years to prevent wood stoves from being installed in new construction. In Comox and Courtenay, the bylaws also said homes that did not already have a wood burning appliance were not allowed to install one after the bylaws were passed.

These bylaws effectively capped the number of wood stoves in these three municipalities, helping to ensure the problem would not get any worse. It also protected people who intentionally moved to cleaner areas from having a wood stove pop up next door.

Do you commit to keeping your municipality's "no new installation" bylaws in place to prevent the increase in the number of wood burning appliances?

Comox

Name	Answer	Comments
<i>Mayoral candidate</i>		
Nicole Minions	Yes	
<i>Councillor candidates</i>		
Steve M. Blacklock	Yes	
Don Davis	Did not reply	
Kealy R. Donaldson	Yes	
Peter Gibson	Yes	
Ken J. Grant	Yes	
Chris T. Haslett	Yes	I believe that this is already being done in Comox
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	Yes, I am committed to maintaining the Town of Comox's current bylaw preventing the installation of new wood burning appliances. I invite you to visit my website (www.healthycomox.ca) to see my commitments to reducing wood smoke exposure in Comox, as well as my voting record and position on various other issues that are important to the health of our community.
Jenn Meilleur	Yes	There is a growing concern that people won't have a heating option in the case of a power outage. This issue will need to be considered and we will need to propose some viable solutions.
Ruby Sidhu	Yes	No doubt new installations have to be stopped. We will also need replacing old stoves to greener sources
Maureen Swift	Yes	

Question 6

Burning of yard waste, including leaves and branches, is regulated by local governments.

These yard waste fires create a lot of harmful localized smoke, impacting neighbours' use and enjoyment of their own property as well as their health.

Although yard waste fires have been banned in Comox, Courtenay, and Cumberland, they are allowed in the rest of the CVRD and are impacting both neighbours and neighbouring communities. (BC regulates larger open burns and agricultural waste fires and these are not the focus of this question).

In 2021, the CVRD convened the multi-stakeholder Airshed Roundtable to develop and implement a Regional Airshed Protection Strategy to guide air quality actions. To help protect public health, one of the main actions includes eliminating yard waste burning.

Do you support the elimination of yard waste burning in the CVRD?

Comox

Name	Answer	Comments
<i>Mayoral candidate</i>		
Nicole Minions	No	I do not have enough information at this time.
<i>Councillor candidates</i>		
Steve M. Blacklock	Yes	Already not allowed in Comox
Don Davis	Did not reply	
Kealy R. Donaldson	Yes	With the new Waste Management facility in Cumberland, there is very little need for yard waste burning. It's important to recognize the human connection to fire and the ability to burn using personal fire pits and opening burning at the .5 M x .5M subscribed sizing, as per CVRD regulations.
Peter Gibson	No	
Ken J. Grant	Yes	
Chris T. Haslett	No	
Jonathan Kerr	Yes	A ban on yard waste burning is already in effect in the Town of Comox. I would support a ban of yard waste in any well-populated CVRD regions, especially those close to the municipalities. However, I would leave this decision to the residents of the CVRD and their elected officials.
Jenn Meilleur	Yes	
Ruby Sidhu	Yes	
Maureen Swift	Yes	