

Economic officer for Comox Valley

By JAMIE BOWMAN
Staff Writer

COURTENAY — The Comox-Strathcona Regional District has just hired an economic development officer, but don't expect him to be out persuading some manufacturing firm to establish a plant here.

That's not on his agenda.

But, helping existing businesses operate to capacity and aiding new ones in finding the starting blocks is more in line with what Arnold Harasymchuk has planned for his new job.

In an interview with The Daily Free Press, Harasymchuk explained he will work as a "facilitator" helping business make the right connections.

A man who likes to speak with metaphors, Harasymchuk says he will direct people to the source that can best help with their particular questions or problems, rather than act as a counselor himself.

"I will direct them down the right path," he says. "But that doesn't mean I'll walk with them all the way."

He likens his free service to that provided by a general practitioner: "He can tell you where you're sick, but he can't necessarily prescribe the cure. But he can direct you to the specialist who can."

After an absence of many months, an economic development commission is back in vogue at the regional district. The regional board had declined to continue the function after Art Burgess quit a job as development officer for the whole North Island about a year ago.

Now, it has been reactivated and this time around the regional district has decided the officer will cover only electoral areas A, B and C, as well as Courtenay and Comox (the Comox Valley from Buckley Bay to Oyster River), and only those areas will pay into the service.

The total budget for the operation is \$48,000, but 45 per cent of

that bill is picked up by the provincial and federal governments in a cost-sharing agreement under the Industry Development Subsidiary Agreement.

With a hard-hitting recession gripping the country, particularly the Comox Valley, Harasymchuk realizes there are bigger problems in the field than he can solve.

"As long as you keep that perspective — that you can't solve the woes of the world — then you're not tempted to try," he says. "As the function starts, there is only so much you can do."

Although he says it's hard to gauge success in his line of work, the new development facilitator has already in his first two weeks managed to get a number of government departments to throw support behind a failing business with six employees and is working to help a man with a good idea overcome a series of "horrendous stumbling blocks" in starting an untried enterprise.

"Much of the stuff I do is confidential," Harasymchuk says, explaining his lack of specifics.

As for the valley's future in these times of public and private spending restraint, Harasymchuk is "optimistic."

"In fact, I think we can hold our own," he says. "I don't know if we'll progress."

He perceives a "wealth of technological expertise" available in the valley, particularly with well-trained but retired Armed Forces personnel, who are for the most part underemployed.

Harasymchuk can usually be contacted during office hours at the regional district office, although he does do "field work" in which he visits business people and their operations.

"The most important thing is I'm there and accessible," he says. "It's kind of an exciting job."