

Together for Sooke

What we did, what we heard,
and what could come next

Shandell Houlden and Seth Elza

Listening Across Difference: **Report on Community Dialogue Pilot**

Acknowledgments

Institutional partners



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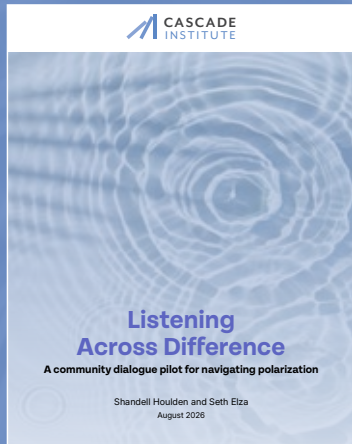
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For more details about the pilot, including the methods used and the findings in those methods, please read *Listening Across Difference: A community dialogue pilot for navigating polarization*.

For more information or to arrange a group presentation on these findings, please contact Dr. Shandell Houlden at houlden@cascadeinstitute.org.



In the face of rising tensions in the community of Sooke, a locally rooted research collaboration hosted Together for Sooke: a series of six small-group community conversations designed to reduce feelings of affective polarization, particularly with regard to climate policy and energy transformation.

Residents shared stories about what Sooke feels like right now, what pressures people are living with, what they value, and what kind of future they want to help create together. The project was led by Dr. Shandell Houlden of the Cascade Institute at Royal Roads University in partnership with Fireweed Learning Commons, a local Sooke education non-profit, and funded by the Accelerating Community Energy Transformation initiative.

This brief summarizes what we did, what we heard, and what could come next. It's not a final verdict on what Sooke thinks. The number of participants was small, and the people who joined skewed older, more civically engaged, and more politically progressive. Still, the conversations surfaced clear patterns and practical ideas for how we can grow our collective capacity to navigate change and difference together as residents of Sooke.



What we did

We conducted six dialogue sessions over three weeks in late 2025, at different days and times, to make participation easier. In total, 23 people attended a dialogue (36 registered, 24 completed the pre-survey, and 16 completed the post-survey).

Each session was small (up to seven people), was led by trained facilitators, and lasted about 75 minutes.

We asked residents about the stories they hear repeatedly about Sooke, what they sense the community wants, moments of connection to place or community, hopes for Sooke five years from now, and how to keep constructive conversations going.

Before and after the sessions, we surveyed participants about their level of trust in community members and the local government, how they feel about people who see things differently, and their views on how Sooke is developing.

Across these conversations, residents described Sooke as a community with deep strengths—yet also a community under strain from growth, infrastructure gaps, and civic participation processes that can feel tense or discouraging.

What we heard

1. People are more divided in how they feel than in what they think

One of the clearer signals from our pre-survey was that most participants described Sooke as a community that broadly agrees that development isn't going well—and estimated that the majority of their neighbours would agree with them. But when asked how they feel toward people who see climate change differently, most reported cool or cold feelings. Seven out of 22 participants who were worried about climate change rated people who disagreed with them at 25 or below on a 100-point scale. This is a pattern researchers call **affective polarization**—where the emotional distance between “us” and “them” can run high even when there's more common ground than people expect. This pilot project was conducted to test a facilitation process for reducing affective polarization.

2. Sooke residents are engaged, but not sure participation matters

Most participants said they follow local government, know how to get involved, and feel comfortable at public meetings. But only one in three felt that local decision makers actually listen to “people like me.” Trust in local government and elected officials is low—while trust in neighbours and fellow residents is much higher. This “engaged but not always heard” feeling shaped a lot of what came up in the dialogues.



3. The “bottleneck” shapes everyday life

The most consistent story was Sooke’s “one road in, one road out” reality. Whether residents see the narrow road as protective of Sooke’s small-town feel, or as a daily stressor (commuting fatigue, emergency preparedness concerns), the single road deeply impacts Sooke’s identity and is tied into the community’s core tensions. A recurring pattern: limited local employment forces commuting, commuting causes fatigue, fatigue depresses local engagement, and weaker engagement makes the underlying problems harder to address.

4. Growth feels inevitable, but people want balance

Residents didn’t talk in simple pro- or anti-development terms. The most common feeling was that development is happening, but the required supports aren’t keeping up—especially infrastructure, health services, and ecological protection. Provincial mandates to build more housing were perceived as out of touch with conditions on the ground.

5. Nature is identity, not just scenery

Many people said they live in Sooke because of forests, watersheds, salmon streams, beaches, hills, and access to outdoor life, and described grief and frustration when development threatens those places. Protecting nature was often described as protecting what makes Sooke “Sooke.”

6. “Community” is real, but unevenly accessible

Participants described strong community assets: volunteering, arts and culture, mutual aid, and people showing up for each other when it matters. But they also described “community” as something that not everyone can easily access, because of commuting pressures, time constraints, or a lack of welcoming gathering places. A related theme: Sooke has a lot of community spirit, but the social infrastructure is fragile, especially as volunteer leaders age out and younger families have limited capacity to step in.

7. Old Sooke / New Sooke is a recognized divide, but also a simplification

People named tensions between long-time residents and newcomers, often tied to land ownership, identity, and fears about change. But many also emphasized that it's not a clean binary—the story can get weaponized, and conflict around the perceived divide seems more present online than in person. Several participants explicitly said they want bridges between groups.

8. Teens are underserved

Several participants said there isn't enough programming for teenagers, and not enough spaces where teens can spend time with their friends without being treated as a nuisance or constantly monitored. This gap was seen as contributing to the isolation of teens.

9. Governance feels hard to navigate, and impact feels uneven

Even among a civically engaged group, many people described a gap between being able to participate in governance (showing up to government-led events, following issues) and believing that participation changes outcomes. Jurisdictional confusion—about what's in the district's hands versus the province's—adds to a feeling of powerlessness.

10. Online spaces distort community and amplify conflict

A strong theme was the mismatch between "Sooke online" and "Sooke in real life." Participants described social media as amplifying negativity and spreading misinformation—making it hard to find common ground when people are operating from different versions of reality. Several participants noted there are effectively two Sookes: a cooperative, neighbourly one they experience in daily life, and a contested, often anonymous one they encounter online.



What could come next

Participants weren't only focused on problems. They also offered concrete ideas for strengthening Sooke's ability to live with disagreement and navigate change. Here are five directions that surfaced in the dialogues, along with some practical examples.

1. Build a healthier civic culture through cross-viewpoint conversation

- Regular, facilitated community conversations (starting with lower-stakes topics).
- "Conflict cafés" and structured dialogue nights.
- Story-based formats like a "Human Library" (talking with someone with a different lived experience).
- Pop-up dialogues in everyday spaces (coffee shops, breweries, community halls).

2. Create more low-barrier "third spaces" to strengthen community life

- Connection-through-activity events (meals, outdoor work parties, community projects).
- Youth-centred spaces and programming, including unstructured hangout space.
- More visible arts and community-making spaces that give people reasons to gather.



3. Lower barriers to participation in governance and increase transparency

- A plain-language “How decisions get made here” guide, distributed through Sooke-wide channels.
- Clearer explanations of what is local versus provincial jurisdiction, and how to engage with each.
- A targeted effort to identify participation barriers (timing, complexity, intimidation) and remove them.

4. Integrate development, services, and ecological protection

- Community events to understand Sooke’s past and future: what has changed, what is being lost, what is worth protecting, what kind of town we’re becoming.
- Infrastructure improvements that make car-free transport feel welcoming: walkability, safe crossings, coherent routes for cyclists and pedestrians.
- Green space and waterfront access protected and treated as key civic infrastructure.

5. Strengthen practical local resilience

- Mutual-support infrastructure.
- Ongoing repair cafés, develop tool libraries, share sheds.
- Local resilience projects that combine tangible benefits with connection: food access, seniors’ support, community repair events.



Key insights

1. People care deeply about Sooke.

Even when frustrated, the underlying tone was attachment and protectiveness.

2. There is more common ground than the “polarized community” story suggests.

Many residents experience day-to-day kindness and cooperation in person, and conflict and strife online. The emotional distance people feel toward those who see things differently is real, and worth taking seriously, especially given limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction.

3. Sooke’s challenges are interconnected.

Road and commuting challenges, services, development, employment, ecology, and belonging share common pressures and common solutions.

4. People want more ways to come together that aren’t just council meetings or social media.

In our post-session survey, 14 of 16 participants said the dialogue was valuable—most often because they heard a wider range of perspectives than they usually encounter. Thirteen of 16 said they’d like to see more events like this in Sooke.