

# Two decades of change

## CEAC's volunteer base running low

By Brad Herron      November 18, 2009      Cochrane Times

The Cochrane Environmental Action Committee (CEAC) and its members are a testament to the power a small group of dedicated citizens can wield.

As 2009 draws to a close, so to does the 20th anniversary of CEAC. Twenty years of enacting environmental change in Cochrane by working with citizens, businesses and government to find a solution that is amicable to all.

Tim Giese, CEAC's long-standing president, said CEAC members made a conscious decision from the beginning, way back in 1989, to remain apolitical and inclusive to those of different political stripes. Over time, this fostered respect in the community and allowed CEAC to accomplish many of its members' goals.

"We don't want to be adversarial. There are times where you should take a stance and say, look, this is an issue and we want to push this as far as we can, but we need to find a compromise," Giese said.

CEAC formed from a need to bring recycling to Cochrane. A room-full of citizens gathered and began to get things done. In short order, Cochrane had a volunteer recycling depot.

"It was kind of visionary and leading edge, we were one of the first communities to have that and for a long time Cochrane has had recycling that the City of Calgary and other municipalities haven't had," Giese said.

Although the program ran well and CEAC was able to find a way to recycle paper, glass, metal and plastic among other materials, Giese said the effort "nearly bankrupted the group as far as volunteers and energy." Running the recycling operation became a full-time job and the task was eventually transitioned to the Town of Cochrane.

The remediation of the former Domtar site in Cochrane has always been one of the primary concerns for CEAC, Giese said. When a developer rolled into town in the 1990s pledging to clean the site, Giese got involved right away by searching for a common ground that the developer would find economically viable and residents would find acceptable from an environmental perspective.

With meeting after meeting, the developer finally started to understand the complexity of the site, which was contaminated with creosote from past wood treatment operations. This was only because CEAC voiced its concerns, Giese said, and struck a brownfield committee to deal with the situation.

"When we look back on that, we hear comments from the Calgary Health Region and Alberta Environment saying, we were so glad you guys stepped up, because we did have issues and concerns, but we weren't sure if we should be meddling with that," Giese said.

Those triumphs, and many others, haven't come easy. Oftentimes, those sitting across the table would start a conversation expecting CEAC to be an activist group, only to learn quickly they are anything but.

"The environmental movement has always been marginalized, so people always call you 'treehugger' or put it down. As soon as you say environmentalist, one ear turns off and by the time the third sentence

comes, the other ear is turned off. So if you come across as being able to see their point of view and see their perspective and want to find a common ground . . . you get respect for that and you get people listening," Giese said.

"And that's the main thing," Giese said. "If you continually complain or whine or be negative about stuff, people tune you out pretty quick and there is enough environmental negativity."