



## The Mural Transformation at Rogers Elementary

### Background

Rogers Elementary in the Victoria School District is situated in a special location: in and adjacent to remnants of one of Canada's most endangered ecosystems. The school's belief statement is "We care about ourselves, each other and this place." In 2013/14 Rogers students, teachers, administration, parents and community partners embarked on a special adventure that helped them to become more connected with those rare Garry Oak ecosystems, to help protect them and to care about "this place".

As a Wild School, Rogers teachers were actively working on increasing student engagement and learning outdoors and in the neighbouring Garry Oak ecosystems. As stewards of this unique natural environment, Rogers Elementary had a challenge. The school entrance, fronted on either side by very large cement walls, was covered with one of the things that most threatens Garry oak ecosystems: an invasive plant species. While the English Ivy covering the wall appealed to many people more than a blank cement wall, the fruiting ivy was fed on by birds and potentially dispersing to start new outbreaks in the sensitive neighbouring ecosystem.

The idea of a Garry Oak ecosystem mural to replace the invasive ivy was hatched and the proposal moved forward because it gained the support of key partners: the principal, a mural artist and other important partners, including funders. A mural can be a big undertaking and an outdoor mural of this size even more challenging. While much planning went into this project, there were surprises along the way to learn from and a very important element that unfolded with the project – the magic of engaging all the school community and beyond.



## Project Proposal and Start-up

The project proposal and initial meetings were crucial in getting the project going. To make this happen, support was needed from:

1. The Principal/ Administration
2. The District and the Facilities Operations
3. At least one person with artistic and operational experience to create the mural (Artist)
4. Funders

While these partners were essential, it was also vital to have a Coordinator or coordinating group able to get the project started, keep it moving and address the obstacles as they came.

The project kick started after a meeting to present the proposal and potential partners to the administration. Artist Joanne Thomson was interested in the project and had experience both with murals such as this and had quite a bit of experience with Garry Oak ecosystems in her art. Joanne had already met on site to measure the walls and provide an estimate of cost and outline of the work. On her first visit, she also met with two young artists from the local Secondary School who were past Rogers students interested in helping and learning.

External organizations and potential partners for funding and support were part of the initial proposal, such as local organizations working for the protection of Garry Oak ecosystems and the local Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, one of the school's neighbours.



*District Facility Operations crew removing the English Ivy from the Rogers wall.*



## District and Facilities Support

Once there was a project agreement with the Principal and key teachers, a proposal had to be sent to the District and Facility Operations. This required laying out how the project would be achieved and any requests required from Facility Operations. The project could not go forward without District and Facility support.

This process took time but eventually it unfolded that Facilities would remove the ivy and prepare the wall prior to painting. One of the first "learning opportunities" happened soon after Facilities support was gained. The project was set to engage the school community and others about the ivy and the need to remove it as a starting point and to gain support. However, one morning, early on in the project (before the engagement started), a crew arrived and began to remove the ivy. This meant doing some quick outreach as not everyone knew and understood about the ivy.

It was also initially proposed that one way to engage the students and accomplish the first part of the project would be for students to remove the ivy. This did not work for the District and as it happened, the ivy had been purposely secured to the wall and was a better job for the professional crew.

Facilities' painting staff did a great job cleaning and painting the wall with the base coat (and Principal Ms. T took a turn at the roller just to kick things off). A fresh canvas awaited!





## School and Community Engagement

A critical and successful part of this project was involving the whole school community. The students, parents, staff and community needed to be on-board and understand about ivy, its impacts and the need to take it off the wall. It was also very important that this project be a school-wide project, engaging everyone as stewards, as fundraisers, in the design and eventually in the mural.

Communicating and engaging everyone, especially in the early phases included:

- A display about Garry Oak ecosystems and invasive species in the front foyer
- Communications home to Rogers families and beyond which included emails, a flyer, engagement on social media and more
- Assemblies (by age groups) to talk to students about the Ivy, the ecosystem and to get their ideas for the Mural
- Letters to neighbours (distributed by a team of students with a teacher)
- Engagement in the fundraising process

As the call went out for support, parents and professionals came forward to help – including a professional photographer and many fundraising connections for support. Students and parents were especially engaged in a number of different fundraising efforts that made a big difference for the project and gave everyone a sense of ownership in the project.



Photo: Victoria News



## Design Process

"The kids have been involved in this. We consulted with them, and parents and staff, and took a vote. And (Joanne is) working with the kids who will do some drawings and give her those images to import into the final design," said principal Maryanne Trofimuk (Victoria News, May 17, 2013)

The design process was a great phase of the project! Ideas and planning were gathered by:

- Feedback from students during an assembly and in-class ideas gathered, led by teachers
- In-class grade 5 sessions led by the Artist (Joanne) and the youth artists she was mentoring
- Species lists gathered and reviewed by conservation partners
- Feedback from teachers and administration
- Ideas and inspiration provided by Joanne as the artist

## Oops – Municipal Approval

Surprise! As it turns out, murals fall under a municipal bylaw requiring the mural to go through a proposal process with the local government, which includes proof of a public process (outreach to the neighbours and community), review by a Council Committee and ultimately gain official approval by Mayor and Council. This was not known when the project started and required a sudden, but thankfully successful, foray into the world of municipal process and politics.

The process included:

- A letter with project outline and design provided to a Municipal Planner



- Completion of a public consultation process (including letters to neighbours, communications with the local community association and school community consultation process)
- An expedited agenda addition to the Arts & Heritage Council Committee meeting (to review the proposal and make recommendations to Council)
- The project going to Council with a vote on whether or not it could go forward

A note that usually murals reviewed through this process are designed in advance and approval is based on the completed design. In this case, we were lucky to have approval of the rough drawing with samples of the artist's work. The District of Saanich now has an attractive brochure describing two options for mural approval processes.



## Fundraising

Fundraising: this element took place from start to finish of the project and wasn't easy. Other mural projects may benefit from having a grant or significant fundraising support such as from the PAC. This project did have some assistance, but was the hardest part of the project. Though many grant applications and local business fundraising letters were sent out, only one grant came through (but a great one) and the rest was primarily from student/school fundraising.

The majority of the funds for the mural came from:

- Student fundraising including a "tooney hike" (gathering sponsors) for the mural with donated prizes (class pizza lunch and individual prizes for fundraising).

- PAC sponsored Raffle for the Mural
- Bottle drive
- A donation of \$1000 from the Garry Oak Meadows Preservation Society

Lessons learned from fundraising would be to ideally have a bit of a fundraising "team" if possible, to engage fundraising support of the PAC from the start of the project and ideally make fundraising applications well in advance if this is an important source of project funding.

## Youth Mentoring

This was not a "step", but a great element that enriched the project. Two former Rogers Elementary students and developing young artists were mentored by the artist Joanne. Joanne was able to get much needed assistance during the project and the students had the opportunity to learn about the process of a mural from planning to design, preparation through all the steps of painting.

The students worked with younger Rogers students on the project as well and served as inspiration and leaders for the elementary students.

In the end, this was a project for the young artists to put on a resume and valuable skills to take away towards future professional goals.





## The Mural

*Victoria News May 17, 2013:* "Later this month or early next, depending on the weather, the school will host a full-day painting event. Every student will have the opportunity to leave the class and participate in painting the mural. In class the students have been learning about the Garry Oak ecosystem and the importance of natural preservation, Trofimuk (Principal) said. 'The kids have a lot of awareness of what's going on, why we're doing this and how the connection is so strong,' she said."

Through May and June the artist (Joanne Thomson), the youth artists, parent volunteers and even Rogers students all worked together to make the Mural a reality. Every day students, parents, neighbours and others would watch as the drawing on the wall turned to painted features and eventually to the whole detailed mural.

By the time it was done, every Rogers student literally had their fingers in the project. Class by class, student by student, they dipped their fingers in the paint to add textures to the shrubs, tree bark and lichen. Full engagement from everyone in this project was a very special part of the mural!



*Ribbon cutting: artists Joanne Thomson and Bryn MacDonald*

## Celebrate!

The best and one of the most important parts of all great projects like this is celebrating at the end. In this case, it was a gathering open to all – the school community, neighbours, funders and other supporters. The story of the mural was told, Raffle prizes were drawn, many thanks given and the ribbon cut by the two key artists. The celebration included excitement, relief – and a strong sense of community that had been built around the mural.

