

# EVOLUTION OF THE ISLANDS TRUST INTO A 21ST CENTURY LEADER

by Lee Middleton

The Islands Trust has a very important role to play on Saturna. It has preserved the island as the idyllic rural place we love and I believe it has a very important role in helping us make this place the shining beacon of sustainable and thriving human and ecological integrity that it has potential to be.



I intend this article as an overview of where our Local Trust Committee might go in supporting this kind of positive agenda, and also a chance to initiate discussion. First some background on the Trust, the local Trust committee and what we are currently doing. I beg your indulgence in this visioning article and in future updates I want to get in to some of the specifics of what we will be working on.

Your Local Trust Committee is made up of two locally elected trustees, myself and Paul Brent who is serving his second term as an Island Trustee. Each of the 13 Islands in the Trust Area elects two Trustees. This makes up a group of 26 Trustees who form a body called Trust Council responsible for governance of the Islands Trust as an organization and also for projects and initiatives in the Trust Area as a whole.

Trust Council elects from amongst its membership three vice chairs and a chair. These four form the Executive Committee of the Trust Council. Each of these four are appointed to serve as Chair of one or more Local Trust Committee's. George Grams is an elected Trustee on Salt Spring Island. He serves on Trust Council as a Vice Chair (Peter Luckham is currently Chair of Trust Council) and is appointed chair of our Local Trust Committee - so he, Paul and I comprise the three members of Saturna's Local Trust Committee. George is also Chair of Mayne and North Pender's Local Trust Committees.

Each Local Trust committee is responsible for land use planning and zoning using the local Official Community Plan as a guide. Each plan was written through community participation - Saturna's plan was last updated in 2000 - and aligns with the objective of the Islands Trust to preserve the ecology and communities of the Gulf Islands for its residents and all British Columbians.

The Trust is a unique body in Canada. It is not a true local government, but it exercises its land use planning function under power granted to it

through the *Municipal Act*, which can of course lead to confusion.

There is no doubt that the Gulf Islands would not look as they do today without the Islands Trust. The rural character of the Islands was under severe development pressure in the early '70s and residents were increasingly concerned that the fragile ecology and beauty of their home would be lost without some form of protection from quarter-acre lot sized development pressures. Island chambers of commerce were so concerned that the tourism industry of the Islands was in danger of being ruined that they joined the chorus of voices urging protection of the Islands. The creation of the Islands Trust in 1974 was the Provincial Legislature's answer to islander's concerns.

It is my opinion that 42 years later it is time for the Islands Trust to re-engage with its vision of preserve and protect, assuming a leadership role in the communities it serves, helping them adapt to changing human use patterns on the islands as well as to a changing climate and to the severely threatened maritime ecology surrounding our islands.

In this the first of a series of articles, I'd like to explain some of what your Local Trust Committee is doing and how we are attempting to build linkages between our local committee and the regional work that is taking place at the Trust Council level. We all have our unique identities, between our Islands and even between your two Trustees, but I think we share enough common ground that we can use the Trust mandate to build a better future for our Islands ecologically and communally.

The Trust's mandate is realized through legislation that sometimes means our reach exceeds our legislative grasp. This leads to frustration from those who feel the Trust should be doing more for our communities (supported as it is by our tax dollars) and these expectations may be a large part of why Island Trust politics at the local level is often so divisive. I ran for Trustee because I saw how damaging division over the Islands Trust could be to a community when I lived on Salt Spring. I believe the Trust can be a vehicle for us to realize many of our aspirations at the local level regardless of what our broader political views may be.

At just over one year in to the mandate on Saturna I see that my fellow Trustee has the best interests of the Island at his heart. I believe that I do too. He and I may differ on the specifics of how we realize a positive vision for the future on Saturna and in the region but we do share the same vision for a renewed Trust serving our Islands through this next century, adapting as best we can to the ecological and social challenges

we face, and doing so in a way that we may become a beacon to other communities.

So as we embark on exploring a positive vision for the Trust and our Island, I underscore that I will make a commitment to work with an open mind and a generosity of spirit with my fellow local trust committee members. I know Trustee Brent and Chair Grams commit to this approach as well. We may disagree on specifics but it is important to underscore we share the same broad vision and sense of purpose. We will also do our very best to get as much broad input from our community, including accessing the creative ideas and expertise of those who make a home here whenever and however possible. Before discussing some of the ideas I have for a re-energised Trust mandate I'd just like to take a moment to summarize some of the Local Trust and Trust Council initiatives currently underway and reflect on the public hearing process used to review development permit applications.

### **SATURNA TRUST COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES**

One of the principal functions of the Local Trust Committee is as a Land Use Planning body, to review applications for development or applications for use that vary from current zoning. This process should be transparent to the public and the criteria for decision making by the Trustees should be clear, so the public can understand the rationale behind the decisions made by the Committee. This is the ideal. Having clear bylaws helps - and more on that in future updates.

Recently we approved a Temporary Use Permit for Saturna Point Holdings campsite by the ferry dock. We encouraged the applicant to come forward before making application to the Committee so that the community could give input early on and help the applicant write a better application. The applicant did a great job of this and in December made application for a Temporary Use Permit for the campsite. This was reviewed by staff and a report written recommending the permit be issued with conditions following a public hearing. This was held in January and following some adjustments based on community input the application was approved at the February trust council meetings. We strived to be as transparent as possible - neighbours were heard and their concerns accommodated as far as reasonably possible. I think the important point here is that neighbours and others who were concerned had an opportunity to voice their concerns. It is perfectly okay that following the decision not everyone agrees the decision was the right one - but they

must feel that their concerns were legitimately heard and not in a token fashion. I believe we did this on the campsite application.

Where things became muddled was in the referral for comment process to other agencies - namely the CRD. I know how this part of the application unfolded was very frustrating to my fellow Trustee and naturally the applicant. It would be tempting to say that this was an issue out of our hands but after some reflection I do agree with my fellow Trustee that we need to be aware of and help smooth the referral process to other agencies. We will attempt to do this in future by requesting reasonable timelines be met - we received the final referral from the CRD in regard to water use the morning of our business meeting in February. This isn't really helpful in supporting good and open decision making.

In the future I will be, along with my fellow local committee members, striving to make any application process as transparent as possible. Building confidence in the local trust committee will allow the community to analyze the positive vision we will be striving toward over the next few years without fearing a hidden agenda.

One of the ways we are attempting to make good decisions to support the health of our Island is to use empirical data wherever possible. Staff at the Trust are currently analyzing the demographic survey issued in February. Approximately 130 households responded to this survey which was designed to get down to a finer level of detail than is possible through Stats Canada's census reports. Through this we hope to better understand the housing needs of the Island as well as what our mix of part time versus full time residents is and how planning might best support both groups. We should be able to report on preliminary results of this survey at our next business meeting.

Another initiative that will take our focus over the next year is a review of the 'density transfer mechanisms' in our Official Community Plan. While this appears a dry and technical planning topic it is at the heart of what our Official Community Plan says should and should not happen in terms of future growth in our community. We feel that the mechanisms are unclear and don't currently function to support good decision making that won't appear arbitrary on the part of Trustees. I'll be talking more on this topic in future updates.

Finally we are undertaking some research into the groundwater resource on the Island. We have knowledge of the East Point aquifer and the bylaws requiring rain water catchment for new construction are be-

ing used on other islands - but there is a lot we don't know about the groundwater resource here. While it is beyond the capacity of the Local Trust Committee to undertake hydrogeological research we are building a library of what research exists and linking with the larger Trust to see what impact the newly proclaimed Water Sustainability Act will have on groundwater usage on our Island.

## **TRUST COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

At the broader Trust Federation, which includes the 13 Trust Area Islands in the Salish Sea, marine issues are taking on increasing prominence. The Trust is being asked to play a broader role in brokering increased industrial use in the Sea consistent with environmental protection of the fabulous ocean ecology that surrounds our homes. In response the Trust is attempting to support the creation of the National Marine Protected Area in the Salish Sea. The Trust Council is also supporting designation of our home waters as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA). This is not as high a level of protection as a Marine Protected Area, but is an excellent tool for creating bridges with the shipping industry to support changes to shipping practise to reduce impacts on the local ocean ecology. The Friends of the San Juans have been incredibly effective in getting the PSSA onto the national agenda in the US and Canada and the Trust is eager to increase our support for this designation.

Trust Council completed its last quarterly meeting on Hornby Island the third week of March. After much discussion, coming from struggling with our legislative mandate as a land use planning body that has actually been given zoning powers over the surface of the sea surrounding our islands, we decided to fund, on a temporary basis, a staff member with expertise in marine conservation. This individual will also be responsible for strengthening First Nations relations in the Trust Area. I was initially sceptical of this twin role, but I have come to see its potential. Leveraging the marine resource protection interests of Trust Area residents with the long standing desire of Coast Salish peoples to protect their traditional marine resources has the potential to be a much more effective strategy than the Trust acting alone.

Lest there be concern, this approach is doomed to fail in the face of massive industrial use in the inland sea; rest assured, we know the only way that increased preservation can happen in a water basin that is home to upwards of five million people is with the cooperation of industry; shipping being the primary commercial agent with whom bridges will need to be built.

In the broader Trust area we are grappling with how industrial aquaculture in Baynes Sound is impacting herring nurse stocks, together with what I believe is an unsustainable herring seine fishery in Baynes Sound and Lambert Channel ( which are in the Denman and Hornby Trust Area waters), in what is the Pacific Basin's most productive herring spawning area. There will be more on Trust Council initiatives in future updates.

## **CONNECTING THE ISLAND WITH THE REGION**

Combining the efforts of the Trust Council at the regional level and the efforts of the Local Trust Committee at the local Saturna level will help us more efficiently use Trust tax resources to build an exemplary island community. The 13 Islands are unique, but have many shared interests. Advancing these at the Trust Region wide level through Trust Council makes sense. Marine protection is an example of a regional initiative that has local application. Many Trustees from other Islands are looking to expand the Trust's ability to make a difference beyond land use planning - within current taxation levels - through pushing the regulatory envelope with our current enabling legislation while also looking to take on additional regulatory powers from other Provincial agencies.

An initiative I am pursuing alongside other Trustees that involves taking on additional regulatory responsibility is for the Trust to assume responsibility for the building code in the Trust area. Currently we are subject to a city based building code administered through the regional district. While administering the building code is a function of Provincial legislation I think if the Code were responsive to local needs this would allow us to champion alternate building and energy use technologies that would seriously enhance our capacity to be self sustaining communities. Pioneering alternate building technologies would set us apart as an example to other communities of what is possible and permit a much fuller expression of our unique Island outlook through our built environment. We're just at the beginning stages of researching this and we will need a lot of community input into what adjustments to the code would be beneficial. Obvious changes are allowing of rainwater catchment as a sole potable water source as well as making grey water septic systems legal.

Likely my allocation of *Scribbler* space is now used up - I will submit regular updates as we flesh out the positive vision for our Island future and any and all ideas are more than welcome. Many thanks for reading this and participating in Island governance. Δ