

Response to 'How Big Brother came to the Gulf Islands' In July 6th Vancouver Sun

Islands Trust Democracy at Work, July 10

Sheila Malcolmson, Chair of Islands Trust Council

In the July 6 article, How Big Brother came to the Gulf Islands, Elizabeth Nickson's gloomy and poorly researched rant describes island communities in a way that makes them unrecognizable to islanders, or to the thousands of visitors who enjoy them each year. She characterizes the few voices, calling for change between elections as a fundamental revolution. I am writing to set the record straight.

Our 470 islands in the Salish Sea are internationally renowned for their extraordinary beauty, biological diversity and wonderful communities with a rich variety of lifestyles and livelihoods. We are a people who passionately volunteer in the life of our communities. The 26 people islanders elect to the Islands Trust every three years are entrusted with the mission of preserving and protecting this unique place, on behalf of all British Columbians. A 2004 Ipsos Reid poll showed that more than 86 per cent of British Columbians surveyed agree that these special islands deserve protection.

With more than half the B.C. population living close by and external economic pressures pushing property values up, there are valid concerns about changes to our way of life. We worry that only the wealthy will be able to live here, that there will be no one left to volunteer for the fire department or coach the soccer team. For the past two terms, the Islands Trust's strategic plan makes "healthy communities" a top priority. Residents are providing a wealth of ideas about how to maintain our islands' socioeconomic diversity. We are amending bylaws and attracting funds for affordable housing -- no small challenge for any community. Many island communities have reviewed zoning regulations to support islanders who wish to work from home, while managing impacts on neighbours.

The 2006 census showed 37 per cent of islanders were self-employed compared with 14 per cent in B.C., and that our economies are diversified and resilient.

On Galiano, hundreds of islanders are actively and creatively engaged in resolving that island's concerns about the sustainable use of commercial forest land. Nickson's characterization of their situation is so unrecognizable that this space does not permit rebuttal.

Nickson's claim that the Islands Trust is "undemocratic" and led by a "small closed elite" reveals no understanding of island governance. Every three years, islanders elect (with some of the highest voter turnouts in B.C.) two trustees to a three-person body (a local trust committee) that makes all land use decisions for their island. This structure gives islanders more, not less, say in land use

decisions than other rural communities in B.C. The same two trustees sit on the Islands Trust council, a 26-member elected body. The trust council does not make, and was never intended to make, local land-use decisions. It is true that the Islands Trust council can deny a local bylaw, but these powers are like a fire extinguisher on the wall; they have been used only once in more than 36 years. Nickson's claim that "trust council can obviate any decision approved by local trustees" is outrageously inaccurate.

Islanders regularly consider governance, too, voting in several referendums over the past few years. In 1999, Bowen Island voted to incorporate as an island municipality within the Islands Trust. Saltspring Islanders defeated a similar proposal in 2002 with 70 per cent of islanders against it, followed by 87 per cent of Gabriola Islanders rejecting this option in 2005. In 2008, Saltspring Islanders defeated a referendum that would have doubled the number of local trustees to four, with the Islanders for Self Government somewhat ironically campaigning against it. Some on Saltspring Island still believe municipal incorporation is the answer, while many others predict increased taxes and unwanted development.

In between making the few difficult decisions to turn down development applications, the Islands Trust and its local trust committees approve dozens of proposals every year. Nickson criticizes the Denman Island local Trust committee for rejecting a park proposal from a developer. In fact, they had the courage and vision to hold out for a better deal that created 700 hectares of park -- 62 per cent more land than the first proposal offered.

Nickson wildly exaggerates the cost and timing of applications. The Saltspring local trust committee considered 44 separate land use applications in the past 18 months, giving preliminary or final approval to 40. One of the few no votes denied the now famous coffee company re-zoning. Any community in B.C. would struggle with accommodating a business that bought rural residential land in hopes of changing the zoning to suit industrial purposes. If the process was more drawn out than it might have been elsewhere, it reflects the local trustees' effort to explore options for the popular coffee roaster, despite steadfast and legitimate concerns from neighbours. The Saltspring trustees even struck a community task force to identify suitable industrial land. Hardly the "iron-fisted conservation government" Nickson portrays.

Every trustee I know has run for election because they care about this special part of the world. We hear from islanders every day about their desires for vibrant communities and economies that fit our fragile environment. We are proud of our beautiful islands and the work our fellow islanders do every day to keep them that way.

Next year, islanders can elect their trustees and even run for office. In the meantime, we welcome their views and advice as we grapple with the same tough decisions facing all local governments.