

June 30, 2010

In Depth – Linda Adams

Gulf Islanders live in one of the most treasured places on earth -- islands with extraordinary beauty, biological diversity and vibrant communities. They also have a unique form of government, created by the province in 1974 to control unbridled development and to 'preserve and protect' the islands. Since then, the province has amended the *Islands Trust Act* many times to make it more effective. For example, it increased local representation in 1977, improved local autonomy in 1989, introduced open meetings and freedom of information in 1998 and updated ethical standards in 2003.

Islanders are passionate about protecting what is important to them. Some wonder if further changes to the *Islands Trust Act* would help, or if municipal incorporation is the solution. I hope some background about how the Islands Trust works will help these discussions.

One of the Islands Trust's most important jobs is to adopt the *Islands Trust Policy Statement*. It identifies the unique amenities and environment that islanders want the Islands Trust to preserve and protect. For example, it says that ecosystems and water resources should be balanced with community character and economic opportunities. With over 50% of BC's population living near the islands, external pressures on our communities have never been greater. Rising housing costs have triggered concerns about the loss of complete communities. In 2009, the Islands Trust Council made 'Sustain Island Character and Healthy Communities' a top goal, with a primary objective to 'support and restore socio-economic diversity'. Among other actions, a Council task force is working to help islanders address housing needs.

Every three years, islanders elect two local trustees. On Bowen Island, they elect 'municipal' trustees. Local trustees wear two hats; they sit on a local trust committee, an autonomous local government that decides about land use for their island. Trustees also sit on the 26-member Trust Council that makes regional decisions about budgets and guiding policies. Council elects four trustees to an Executive Committee that guides the Islands Trust's day-to-day work. It also reviews bylaws from local trust committees and Bowen Island Municipality, confirming they support the goals in the *Islands Trust Policy Statement*. Each Executive Committee member chairs one or more local trust committees.

Like local governments across BC, your local trust committee is responsible for adopting, following and occasionally amending an Official Community Plan (OCP) that guides development for the future. It seeks input from islanders about pressing land use issues and works to resolve them. And because you, your neighbours or off-island property owners can apply to change land use, your local trust committee makes decisions about applications. It listens to applicants' proposals, hears from neighbours and considers whether the change will aid long-term community goals. It debates and decides on-island in open meetings. The idea that others regularly veto local decisions is simply untrue.

Some work of a local trust committee is based on requirements the province places on all local governments. To comply with provincial law, the Salt Spring Island Local Trust Committee is currently working to protect fish-bearing streams. It recently met provincial requirements to address climate change in the Salt Spring OCP. Islanders themselves identify many issues like affordable housing, availability of industrial lands and protection of water supplies, all of which attract conflicting input from the community. The topics are complex and often controversial. If the decisions were easy, no one would be upset with the outcomes.

The Islands Trust works closely with provincial agencies and regularly discusses changes to the *Islands Trust Act* or other provincial acts to increase local control over land use issues, such as forestry and mining. Provincial representatives indicate that making changes to provincial acts is a

lengthy and complex exercise. With limited resources themselves, they rarely initiate changes unless other options have been ruled out. While the province was prepared to amend the *Islands Trust Act* to increase the number of Salt Spring trustees from two to four, Salt Spring Islanders defeated the related referendum in 2008. Lately, the province seems preoccupied with concerns other than the *Islands Trust Act*.

And what about municipal incorporation, a topic of discussion on Salt Spring Island? In 2002, Salt Spring voters soundly defeated an incorporation referendum. However, Salt Spring's local trustees and CRD director recently asked the province to initiate a governance study again. So far, the province has indicated that it is unwilling to fund such a study any time soon.

For those who want to influence decisions affecting their communities, there are still effective (and immediate) ways of getting involved:

**Today:** Subscribe to notices and newsletters on the Islands Trust web site. Read about local issues. Write, email and talk to your trustees. Attend and speak at meetings. Volunteer to sit on a citizens' advisory group. It's a rewarding way to make your community a better place.

**Next Year:** Local elections will take place November 19, 2011. Nominate and campaign for someone or run for election yourself. Think carefully about which candidates to support and be sure to vote. This is democracy in action. Your voice and your vote do count.

**The Future:** The *Islands Trust Policy Statement* influences all decisions in the Islands Trust Area. A review has begun and will likely continue next year. The review process will be one of the most effective ways for islanders to influence local land use decisions for years to come. What is most important about your environment, community and way of life? Watch for up-coming opportunities to tell the Islands Trust what this important document should say.

Regardless of the structure of local government, local decisions are most affected by the people who speak up and get involved.

*The writer is the Chief Administrative Officer of the Islands Trust and was a planner for Salt Spring Island for ten years.*