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Structural changes considered for Islands Trust

Since March 2006, the Islands Trust has been considering how changes to its governance structure might accommodate increasing differences between the Islands. Last year, a governance task force identified political representation as the first priority for consideration.

Since changes of this type might require alterations to the *Islands Trust Act*, which is provincial legislation, the provincial government recommended an independent governance review be undertaken. This was completed in mid-April; it also included a study of options for relationships between the Islands Trust and regional districts, with particular focus on Salt Spring Island and the Capital Regional District.

Now public consultation is sought, particularly opinions on the alternatives highlighted by the review. There will be a series of public meetings, and a questionnaire has been set up on the Islands Trust website.

At the Islands Trust Council meeting in June, the results of the public consultation will be discussed, and a decision made as to whether to request that the province make changes to the *Islands Trust Act*. If these are needed, they could be presented to the Legislature at the 2008 Spring session, in time to be reflected in the November 2008 Islands Trust elections.

The Problem

The Trust Islands have always been a highly diverse group, right from the inception of the Islands Trust in 1974. They range from the smallest, many uninhabited, to the largest, Salt Spring, which in recent years has seen an explosion of population (to nearly 10,000) and building, with many properties valued at more than a million dollars.

And it is the growth of Salt Spring which has given rise to concern about Trust governance. Salt Spring has twice the area of sparsely populated Gambier, the next largest Trust Island; two and a half times the population of Gabriola, the next most populous, and contributes nearly three times as much to the Trust budget as Gabriola.

Bowen Island, with a population a little less than Gabriola and an area about half that of Gambier, voted a few years ago to become a municipality within the Trust and take responsibility for its own land use planning staff. Five Islands—Gambier, Lasqueti, Saturna, South Pender, and Thetis—have resident populations of less than 500.

The Present Structure

There are, in total, thirteen Local Trust Areas (including Bowen), with the smaller Islands—some 400 of them—included with the larger ones. Each Local Trust Area elects two trustees to its local trust committee (LTC), which also has a

chairperson (from another Island) drawn from the four-member Trust Executive. Bowen Island, the only municipality within the Trust Area, elects two of its municipal councillors as trustees. All trustees are members of the Trust Council (created in 1990), which meets quarterly and elects the Trust Executive. So each LTC, with two representatives, has an equal say on Trust Council, the primary policy-making body.

As Salt Spring Island has grown disproportionately to the other Islands, its representatives have complained of the workload which they must shoulder, both for land use planning and for representation at Trust Council. Some Salt Spring residents point to the fact that Salt Spring trustees represent nearly 10,000 residents, while trustees on some other Islands represent as few as 236.

Other issues which impact particularly on the larger (and potentially more urbanized) Islands are the consideration of diverse opinions in a small LTC, and the technical problems of a small quorum (2) which make it difficult for trustees to discuss matters informally (because of legislation requiring all meetings with a quorum to be public), and which may give inappropriate power to the off-island chair.

The Options

The options identified by the independent review center on whether Salt Spring should be treated differently from the other Islands. Specifically, should it have four trustees on its LTC, to spread the workload? If it had four trustees, should they all be on Trust Council, or just two of them? Who should decide? Should any Island that went over (say) 7,500 population have four trustees? Maybe all Islands, large and small, should have four trustees (but only two on Council, otherwise Council would have 52 members)?

And, of course, the status quo (two Trustees per Island, 26 on Council) is a well-tried and quite possible option.

Co-ordination with Regional Governments

The Islands Trust has land use planning authority, but most services (water, sewer, building permits and inspection, roads, etc) are provided by other government bodies, typically regional districts. This requires close co-ordination between the Trust and these other bodies; a problem closely related to the trustee workload concerns noted earlier.

On Salt Spring, despite the existence of numerous co-ordination agreements and protocols with the Capital Regional District (CRD), these overlapping responsibilities lead to duplication, confusion and sometimes disputes.

The independent review has suggested a number of possible

solutions to this co-ordination problem, with the idea that whatever is found to work on Salt Spring can be used as a template for other growing Islands.

The alternatives that have been identified include sharing office space and resources between regional districts and the LTCs, having a joint committee of trustees and the regional director meet regularly, creating an Advisory Commission that would make recommendations to the Regional District and the LTC; or creating a 'customized' commission (including the regional director, the trustees, and possibly other service providers) that would have authority (under a regional district bylaw) to make decisions

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on the delivery of services. Such a commission would not, however, have authority to make land use decisions.

A final option would see a trustee serve as the regional director, but this would involve legislative changes.

What To Do

All these options, plus extensive background information, are laid out on the Island Trust website, and are also being presented at public meetings on the Islands. If you want your opinion heard, you should complete the questionnaire. It's also important to note that your choices are not limited to those set out here—other suggestions would be welcomed by the trustees wrestling with this difficult problem. ✍

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