

  
Gabriola Island  
July 5th, 2021

Dear Trustees,

I am writing to add my voice to the many who have addressed you with concerns regarding the Islands Trust Policy Statement Draft Bylaw No. 183. You have heard compelling arguments, eloquently expressed, from a number of island residents who have vast experience and knowledge, and what I say here is intended to support these. My focus in this letter will be on the matter of the purpose of the Trust - your purpose - , the foundations on which the Trust claims to base the new document, and lastly, the language used to outline policy in the document.

I begin with the by now heavily-canvassed question of the purpose of the Trust, over which there has been considerable debate within your group. Here I think the path is clear, or ought to be: the mandate of the Trust, and hence the Trustees, is given by the relevant legislation, that which called the Trust into being and any subsequent legislative revisions. In other words, it is the Government of British Columbia that has assigned this mandate, and it is not the place of each elected Trust Council to revise that mandate as it sees fit. If you are unsure of what you signed up for, you may consult the government for guidance. There should be no need, however: the history of the relevant legislation and of the Trust makes it very clear that it exists in response to perceived contemporary and future harm to the natural environment of the islands due to human activity, including real estate development. Thus, your primary focus should indeed be on the natural environment, preserving and protecting it, as so many have been insisting in recent weeks. We should also see continuity and stability with respect to understanding of purpose, so that momentum is not lost each time a new Council takes over.

Legal considerations aside, it has also been pointed out both that the need for the protection of the natural environment and the rural character of the islands is now more acute than ever, and that, seeing as there are financial and personnel constraints on what the Trust can do, it cannot afford to dilute its energies, funds, and time by turning to other interests not originally contained in the mandate. You cannot, on the one hand, acknowledge a state of climate emergency, acknowledge that some islands are very close to reaching the limits of sustainability of the

natural environment in the face of continuing human development, and then decide that other matters merit your attention equally.

The "other interests" I refer to above particularly include the provision of affordable housing and pressure from various quarters to increase the population and population density on our islands. As so many people have pointed out, increased development and increasing population density stand in direct opposition to the goal of preserving and protecting the natural environment. Again, this should not even be a question for the Trust, except locally where enforcement of existing bylaws could control obstacles to availability of rental housing, i.e. the fact that many landlords choose lucrative short-term holiday rentals over long-term arrangements that could house islanders. Where do these pressures come from? One of your correspondents, Ms. Harlene Holm, a former trustee, has identified the source so insightfully when she urges you to "Please set aside your kind and inclusive hearts and do the very necessary work of the Islands Trust" (p.339 of the June 2021 Quarterly Meeting agenda documentation). It is goodness of heart, the discomfort at seeing people homeless or having to leave the islands due to not being able to find new rental situations, that drives residents, including Trustees, to suggest that we should be making room for more. In the face of human unhappiness, it takes some strength to resist and remember that doing so inevitably adds pressure on the environment we are supposed to be protecting. The kinds of solutions some are seeking, furthermore, seem to be pointing in the way of increased urbanification as opposed to the "rural character" of the islands that is also to be preserved and protected: multi-family housing, i.e. apartment buildings, duplexes and triplexes, is characteristic of urban environments, not rural ones, and thus should not be erected here. I think we have to be brutal here: on the one hand, yes, there should be a solution for local retail and seasonal workers on low wages who need to be housed, but otherwise no, it is not up to any agency, or to the communities themselves, to ensure that anyone who wants to live here, or continue to live here, should be able to do so.

I turn now to the foundations of the draft policy document. My concern is that the draft policy document, in refusing to prioritize any focus for its mandate, is trying too hard to be inclusive of all sources of information and expert guidance. In the "Request for Decision" document of June 24<sup>th</sup>, p. 4, we read that all sources of expertise are to be treated equally, with no priority accorded any: "science", social science, "local knowledge", "Indigenous ways of knowing":

"Multiple Ways of Knowing: In order to develop informed, area-based understandings, Trust Council will benefit from being guided by multiple ways of knowing that each hold unique value and wise counsel to support more informed decision making in the Trust Area. The current draft of the new Policy Statement articulates the need for decision-making to be guided by the best available area-based mapping, science, social science, local knowledge, and Indigenous ways of knowing. This requires ... to ... be open to guidance from all of these multiple ways of knowing at the same time, rather than forcing them to mesh together or prioritizing one too heavily over the others."

This is very dangerous indeed: surely, when we are looking to identify threats to the natural environment and ways to counteract these, we must trust to the best peer-reviewed and conclusive findings of natural science (ecology, zoology, botany, hydrology, geology, marine science etc.). Luckily there is a very large body of such available. What has social science to say here? Nothing at all, surely. As a social scientist myself, I can confidently say that there is no comparable body of reliable knowledge in our domains: we have interesting theories held by a few, perhaps, which compete with others and are subsequently superseded in time. This is fun for us, but the public may be misled into selecting one such theory from the mass and following it uncritically, unaware of debates and doubts. I am horrified by the statement that social science should be placed on equal footing with natural or applied natural science in guiding policy that could affect the islands' natural environment: that would lead to disaster.

Finally, I will suggest that once you have determined what policy you wish to propose to us, the document be rewritten. The goal should be clear, plain, unambiguous language, with as little leeway of interpretation as possible. Definitions of concepts should be provided. Shorter is better; a lot of streamlining can take place at the same time that you work towards clarity. Definitions of concepts should be provided. The briefing note of June 11<sup>th</sup> to Trustees indicates that a move away from the usual set of formal definitions has been made:

"The draft also reflects a new approach to "Schedule 1 – Definitions". In the current (2003 version) of the Policy Statement, definitions of terms are spread through selective footnotes and a definitions section at the end.

First Nations engagement feedback, and a consideration of how the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act will be implemented into the future, has suggested a move away from fixed academic (mostly colonial) "definitions" in favour of more context-specific "interpretations". This helps to give space for multiple ways of knowing to inform decision-making, including from the best available science, social science, local knowledge, and Indigenous ways of knowing. Thus, the draft does not include a separate definitions section. Rather, where it was deemed necessary to provide Trust Council's interpretations of certain terms for clarity, these have been listed in the preamble sections of the document."

Here again we see well-meaning but misguided "inclusiveness" taken to an extreme. I am sure everyone, Indigenous people included, is very aware that precise definitions are crucial in legal documents if they are to be of any use. We do not want a situation in which each local Trust interprets the document differently as suits its purpose, or where vagueness renders the document toothless.

I am sure that ultimately, we all want the same thing, which is a Policy Document that will guide the Trust in preserving and protecting what we have here, with a less "human-centric" perspective than has been evident in the past. However, in trying to do too much and trying to be all-inclusive in sources of guidance and information, as well as language, we may end up not being able to accomplish very much at all. I think that with a narrowing of focus and of inspiration, we just might be able to get closer to our goal.

yours sincerely,

Amanda Pounder  
Gabriola Island