



Dealing With Big Issues

Someone recently asked me why the Islands Trust takes on big issues such as climate action, reconciliation, and housing, since it is primarily a land use planning agency. This means focussing on zoning, permitting, official community plans, etc. Aren't other levels of government meant to deal with those other, overarching issues?

It's a good question. Here's a short answer: the way we use land is inescapably connected to those larger issues.

For instance, reconciliation: Yes, the provincial and federal governments are responsible for resolving questions of rights and title, and spearheading reconciliation generally. But what happens at higher levels filters down to the local level. For instance, Canada and BC are both signatories to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). In 2020, BC passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA), legislation that outlines how UNDRIP will be implemented. This includes numerous requirements for local governments.

Also, local governments are required to ensure that archeologically significant sites are protected. As we learn more about the millennia of Indigenous habitation on the islands, this task is becoming more complex, and also more compelling. This area is rich in cultural heritage. Protecting it is both a duty and an honour.

Not only that, neglecting to do so can lead to trouble. Grace Islet is just one example of how a lack of due care led to a painful, expensive, time-consuming situation. (You can Google *Grace Islet* to learn more.)

Also, all government agencies are required by law to engage in meaningful consultation with First Nations. A series of key legal decisions, tracing back to Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, has made this clear. Again—if this doesn't happen properly, it can lead to trouble. For instance, in 2013, the Municipality of Whistler was unable to get its new official community plan approved, because the BC Supreme Court ruled that Whistler had not sufficiently consulted with the Squamish Nation.

It's not just about staying out of trouble. Developing good relationships with First Nations hugely enriches the Trust's work. We can learn about traditional ecological knowledge and practices, which helps us preserve and protect. And good political relationships can support closer connections between Indigenous communities and Island residents, creating opportunities for cultural and economic cooperation, better land stewardship, and friendships.

The climate crisis shows up in *all* land use decisions.

For instance, as the climate changes, groundwater quality and quantity comes under threat. The Trust needs to understand what this is likely to look like.

There's lots at stake—we want to be sure that there will be enough water for human populations and ecosystems. Everything that happens above the ground can impact the groundwater—every house built, every clearing created, every well drilled or dug. That means thinking about climate impacts with every decision.

Waterfront properties face rising sea levels and storm surges. How to minimize erosion and protect the homes? Also, the Trust Area is habitat for many species at risk—both flora and fauna. Invasive species, from bullfrogs to Ivy, are another concern. Pollinator populations are declining. And so much more. Land use planning needs to consider all those challenges, which are intensifying due to climate change. We need functioning ecosystems not just for water, but also for fire protection, food security, shade, and the pleasure and meaning nature brings to our lives.

As well, many islanders want Denman Island to become more “climate friendly”—in particular, by minimizing our carbon emissions. Land use decisions play a role.

Housing, another huge issue, is partly about what gets built, and where. Absolutely, other levels of governments need to take the lead in providing programs, policies, and funding, but land use regulations need to support those measures and to ensure we have the type and scale of housing options that are right for this place. Dealing with these big issues is not easy! And as the person who asked the original question pointed out, it can be expensive. The Trust, like all local and regional governments, faces big challenges. Our work seems to get more and more demanding, but responding with more programs and more careful processes costs money and thus drives up taxes, making island life less affordable. It's tricky!

I'm afraid I can't find a way to end this column in a tidy or upbeat way. In answering one question, I've raised new ones. What I can say is that it's good we are talking about this.