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Sent: Wednesday, April 5, 2023 1:30 PM
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To Salt Spring LTC:

This article appeared in the March 15, 2023 edition of the Driftwood newspaper. Please place it on the official record.

Regards,

Frants Attorp
Salt Spring Island

Experts Be Damned!

By Frants Attorp

The assault on the Islands Trust is gaining momentum. It is yet another reminder that elections have consequences.

At the February 9 Local Trust Committee meeting, Trustee Jamie Harris argued that, unlike the Sunshine Coast, “we don’t have a problem with lack of water”, that “we (the Trust) don’t need to have our noses in the water business” as water is already protected by the CRD and Ministry of Transportation, and that trades people “know where the water is.”

Mr. Harris doesn’t seem to understand that the Islands Trust, through its zoning powers, is responsible for protecting watersheds and ensuring there is enough water in perpetuity, not just for individual developers, but for entire neighbourhoods and all natural systems such as lakes and streams. Neither the CRD building inspector nor the Ministry of Transportation has such responsibilities. Are lay people with a monetary interest in development now the go-to water experts?

Trustee Harris’ development-at-any-cost agenda conflicts with efforts to strengthen proof-of-water requirements to meet provincial guidelines. A 2020 staff report on water sustainability states: “Currently, staff are receiving subdivision applications utilizing ‘well yield tests’ that have been carried out for as little as four hours. Senior Freshwater Specialist advises that these should not be considered ‘pumping tests’ sufficient to address policies around sufficient and sustainable

groundwater withdrawal for the life of the development, potential impacts to neighbouring wells, and the environment.”

A draft bylaw amendment from last May specifies, among other things, that pump tests must last a minimum of 12 hours (with the total daily required volume not taking more than 24 hours to pump), all while groundwater levels are continuously monitored. That amendment has still not been adopted.

Whether the issue is new subdivisions or blanket rezoning for Accessory Dwelling Units matters little—water use increases, less so at first, but dramatically and unpredictably over time as build-out is reached and climate change bites. That’s why long-term planning and respect for the precautionary principle are essential. Even without further rezoning, at least 5000 more people will need water once all existing lots are fully developed.

We all want more affordable housing, but unless the new units are guaranteed to go to the target group, simply increasing densities will do great damage without alleviating housing shortages. Water is a huge issue, along with other considerations such as protecting rural character, limiting growth and maintaining healthy ecosystems.

The Trust Policy Statement predicted this tug-of-war long ago: “Potential for conflict exists: conflict between short and long-term interests and between unlimited use of the Trust Area and ongoing stewardship.”

Conflict could be minimized if island residents were given the opportunity to help create a sustainable vision for the future before massive changes to our Official Community Plan are drafted. There’s a huge difference between an OCP review and a major OCP amendment—the first seeks broad public input about priorities and strategies, while the second marks the end of a process. Unfortunately, our trustees have decided to skip the former and go straight to the latter.