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Editorial: Biting Bullets

On March 10, Islands Trust Council passed its annual budget. For many years, the Islands Trust has been extremely reluctant to increase the taxes it charges to Gulf Island property owners for their local government and planning services. Islands are used to having their wishes constrained by tight budgets, and successive Trust finance committees have been more than prudent in keeping costs down. The 2006/7 budget is about \$4 million; the Trust is a rather minimal government organization.

Over these same years, the provincial government contribution to the Trust has been steadily and deliberately reduced. In 1994 it contributed 26.7% of the Islands Trust's total budget; in 2005/6 it will be 4.1%. The Trust mandate—'Preserve and protect ... for the benefit of the Province generally'—has not been changed. It's just that successive provincial governments are too cheap to pay their share, and in fact have been downloading these additional costs onto Gulf Island taxpayers. Between 1994/5 and 2005/6 the provincial grant to the Trust has been reduced from \$469,435 to \$178,000. The grant for the coming fiscal year will be reduced by a further \$58,000; there are no more reserves to tap, so we either ante up or cut services.

Costs, of course, have been rising, although staff, working under the same collective agreement as provincial employees, have had their wages frozen for some time. Now is the catch-up time for them too. The additional cost of this is estimated at around \$200,000, and the provincial government's payroll processing charge has been increased by an extra \$20,000.

There's a bit of extra money for bylaw enforcement, but most of the other increases over last year are not significant. The Executive Committee, all four of whom now work full time, get

small increases, but the Trust Chair is still paid \$33,000 annually.

The resultant tax increase is estimated at \$8.30 per \$100,000 assessment, up 12.8% from last year. It may be less, depending how much the total of assessments on the Islands rise. Don't forget that the Trust only accounts, on the average, for 10 - 12% of Islanders' total property taxes, so the actual increase from this will be somewhere around 1.2% of a total tax bill. And that can be blamed mostly on yet another provincial government not paying its share.

And maybe not supporting the Trust. Over the last couple of months we have learned of two Trust bylaws that experienced delays in receiving provincial approval for apparently ideological reasons. One was the Galiano Road Plan Bylaw, which was delayed for reasons described as 'private property rights' or 'broader provincial interests'; it was delayed long enough that it could be withdrawn by newly elected trustees. The second was a Gabriola bylaw requiring Temporary Use Permits for Short Term Vacation Rentals (STVRs). This met with considerable delay until it was pointed out that the previous bylaw had not permitted STVRs at all!

These delays will be raised by the Trust in meetings with the government. It will also highlight the growing list of legislative powers needed by the Trust to make it possible to carry out its mandate.

Could it be that the government's strategy towards the Islands Trust is financial starvation plus legislative frustration? It's time to stop this nonsense and treat (and fund) the Trust with the respect it deserves. ✍

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>