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Guest Editorial: Updating the Islands Trust

Kim Benson, Chair, Islands Trust Council

Sustainability, development, housing costs, tourism, governance, public consultation—these terms convey quite different meanings in 2007 than they did in 1974 when the Islands Trust was established, especially when we think about the issues that now face the Islands Trust Area.

Almost 33 years ago, the Province of British Columbia enacted the *Islands Trust Act* 'to preserve and protect the trust area and its unique amenities and environment for the benefit of the residents of the trust area and of the Province generally.'

There are no other local governments in BC like the Islands Trust. It's a federation of independent island governments, with a common purpose: to 'preserve and protect.' Local governments in the Islands Trust plan land use, regulate development, and act to conserve the land and waters of the Trust Area.

The significance and sensitivity of our islands are internationally recognized. But today, more than ever, increasing pressures from development, tourism, and population growth are having significant impacts on our environment, economies and communities.

While the Islands Trust's legislated mandate is as valid as ever, the challenges and complexity of delivering that mandate are escalating dramatically. Within the last 30 years, the permanent population in the Islands Trust Area has increased by 142%, from 9,490 to 23,000. Since just 2001, property values have doubled, creating new challenges for housing affordability and community diversity on our islands. We now receive twice the number of rezoning and subdivision applications than we did in 2001, while the number of planners we have to assess those applications has remained virtually the same.

Today, people are more aware and informed and want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. Public consultation is increasingly important in this age of digital and internet communications. Knowledge about the environment and its importance has grown dramatically, along with the expectation that we will consider this new knowledge in every decision. Climate change is emerging as a planning issue. And while accelerated growth in the tourism sector is expected in advance of the 2010 Olympics, housing affordability and increasing BC Ferries fares are threatening the social and economic sustainability of our island communities.

The 26 elected members of the Islands Trust Council are developing a strategic plan to address these 21st century

challenges. We have strategic initiatives underway to adapt and improve the Islands Trust in five key areas: (1) governance; (2) delivery of services; (3) bylaw enforcement; (4) public education; and (5) our annual budget.

First, the Islands Trust Council wants to ensure that we have an effective political structure that will sustain and serve our island communities well into the future. The Islands Trust Governance Review, now underway, is examining options for: the size of local trust committees; representation at the Islands Trust Council table; and coordination with regional districts (with an initial focus on the Capital Regional District). This independent review, undertaken in consultation with the Ministry of Community Services, will be completed in mid-April. Public consultation will begin in May (for more details see related article page, 10). In June, the Islands Trust Council will consider whether it will formally request the Province to make legislative changes to the *Islands Trust Act* regarding governance.

Second, the Islands Trust is undertaking several internal reviews, aimed at improving the way we deliver services to our constituents. We are looking at administrative efficiency, the distribution of staff and resources amongst Local Trust Areas, customer service and fiscal accountability. Recommendations will be ready before we finalize next year's budget.

Next, in response to ever-increasing public demand, the Islands Trust is bolstering its bylaw enforcement efforts. While there is a high level of voluntary compliance with local island bylaws, there are also increasing community expectations that we will enforce these bylaws rigorously.

Fourth, we recognize that communication is an essential part of delivering the Islands Trust's 'preserve and protect' mandate. We have recently worked with partners from San Juan County in Washington State to publish 'A Place in the Islands' a beautiful new publication that will provide helpful information to people who are new to island life. We will be unveiling this exciting project in March and we will distribute it throughout the islands in the coming months.

Finally, the Islands Trust Council is in the process of determining what financial resources it needs to serve island communities in the upcoming year. We will make the final decision at our next quarterly meeting, scheduled for March 27 to 29 on Gabriola Island. Soon, you will see advertisements asking for your input. We'd like to hear from you. ☺

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