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Island growth patterns could change in complying with *Bill 27* clause

Patrick Brown & Christa Grace-Warrick

Local Trust Committees throughout the Islands Trust are working to amend their Official Community Plans (OCPs) to include provisions for the reduction of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions to meet a provincial government deadline of May 31 this year. Islands outside the Islands Trust Area are subject to similar requirements to be included in Regional District Growth Strategies by May 31, 2011.

Local governments throughout BC must set GHG reduction targets, and revise their land-use planning approaches. Typically, the suggested changes in land-use and planning policies are to concentrate future development in hamlets and villages, rather than following typical dispersed patterns.

On the Gulf Islands, this represents a significant change in settlement patterns, and has the potential to conflict with the wishes of Islanders and their communities, not to mention the Trust's 'preserve and protect' policy.

Public hearings on the new OCP amendments are scheduled within the next few weeks on most of the Trust Area's islands in order to meet the deadline imposed by the Province (see Box, page 7).

A Single Clause in Bill 27

The new requirements originated with the passage of the *Local Government (Green Communities) Statutes Amendment Act* by the provincial government in May, 2008. The Act actually included numerous amendments to many pieces of legislation affecting local government but, no doubt for political reasons, derived its title from only one apparently innocuous provision:

'Section 877 [of the *Local Government Act*] is amended by adding the following subsection: (3) An official community plan must include targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the area covered by the plan,

and policies and actions of the local government proposed with respect to achieving those targets.'

Each of the islands in the Islands Trust Area has its own OCP, created locally to meet local conditions, and all different. OCPs are officially revised every few years on a rotating schedule which allows for spreading staffing and budget load.

Most of the more recently revised OCPs have specific provisions for the protection of the environment and for sustainability, but prior to the passage of the *Act*, none had specific targets for GHG reduction, and few had specific plans to accomplish this.

Top Down Changes

The Islands Trust has been faced with this top-down requirement to add specific provisions to 19 OCPs which were, up to now, essentially bottom-up bylaws based on the Islands Trust Policy Statement together with the unique requirements of each Island and its inhabitants.

Soon after *Bill 27* was passed, the Islands Trust formulated a 'Climate Wise Islands' project to guide Local Trust Committees in making changes, which require local bylaws amending each OCP.

Land Use Planning in Indecent Haste

The focus of Local Trust Committees' (LTC's) powers is on landuse planning. In considering whatever changes might be made to reduce GHG emissions, the limitations of the Island Trust's authority must be remembered. While the Trust may control density and zoning through OCPs and Land Use Bylaws, land subdivision is under the authority of the Ministry of Highways. Land servicing, development cost charges, and building inspection are under various regional districts within which the islands lie. Taxation relevant to GHGs is, of course, a provincial responsibility.

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The Islands Trust planning department, faced with the problem of amending all the OCPs in the limited time before June 2010, first developed general strategies by which landuse could be planned to reduce GHG emissions. In September 2009, drawing on planning studies carried out for urban areas and for Salt Spring Island, it published a 26-page guidebook, 'Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the Islands Trust Area.'

Besides setting out the responsibilities of the various players in land development and building, the report also covered the setting of GHG targets, and policies and actions that might be adopted by LTCs to reduce GHG emissions.

This report was then used by planners in discussions with Island LTCs and their communities to determine Island-specific strategies which could be written into OCPs. The process led to the creation of the OCP amending bylaws which, on all Trust Islands, are currently in the process of public hearing and passage by LTCs.

Reducing GHGs Through Land Use Planning

Little reliable data is available on the current quantities of GHGs emitted on the Islands. However—bearing in mind the absence of industrial installations—the assumption has been widely made that the GHGs emissions which might be reduced through land-use planning changes would result half from buildings and half from automobile transportation. (Smaller amounts may be attributed to solid waste disposal and ferries, and the GHG's inherent in the importing of food could also be significant.)

These relationships led quickly to the conclusion that the most promising area of reduction was transportation, and that this could be most effectively achieved by reducing both the necessity of private vehicle trips and their length.

This in turn led to the planning mantra 'compact, complete, and connected communities,' which is consistent with the approach to GHG reduction that is being adopted in urban areas of the province. In other words, the greater density of development, the fewer automobile trips would have to be made, and the more easily people could access what they needed by walking, cycling, public transit, or other less GHG-intense means of transportation.

Greater housing density could also reduce GHG emissions by reducing energy use in buildings—through smaller dwellings, possibly with common walls.

Density Transfer & Its Limitations

Unfortunately, the Islands have not developed that way. They are, in a planning sense, mainly rural with both residential and commercial development scattered, often widely. The small population and tax-base of most Islands precludes conventional public transport systems; island transport relies heavily on automobiles traveling over inefficient and sometimes eccentric road networks. Island vehicles travel often, even if they do not travel far.

The best tool for clustering housing seems to be density transfer, provisions for which have already been written into some OCPs but not others. Density transfer allows for current development potential to be sold by landowners, who want to maintain open land, to increase density on lots in areas designated as hamlets or villages. In this way, clustering can take place without increasing overall island density. However density transfer does require a willing seller and a willing buyer to find each other.

Salt Spring, for example, has a density transfer provision in its OCP. In 2007, a study of the future GHG consequences of development on the Island compared 'build-out' under present zoning and two alternative development patterns. The alternative patterns are 'hamlets' of some 350 dwellings each, combined with villages at Ganges and Fulford Harbour and a pattern which concentrated all future development into the villages.

Modeling of the needs of the hamlet approach yielded a 7% decrease in GHGs compared to current build-out. Modeling of concentration into the Ganges and Fulford yielded a 22% decrease. These calculations take into account reductions both in automobile use and in building energy needs.

However, *all* unbuilt density was assumed to be transferred to hamlets or villages in both models. This possibility might be offered to landowners as an option, but it would be unusual, to say the least, to make it compulsory.

In terms of GHG reduction, density transfer works better in urban areas, where large-scale 'green' housing projects can be encouraged.

Island Bylaws Vary

A number of Islands have published proposed bylaws amending their OCPs with the intention of meeting the requirements of *Bill 27*. With a few exceptions, they commit to the 33% reduction in GHGs by 2020 target, and include the provision that Island planning will move towards the creation of 'compact, complete, and

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connected communities' (read 'urban'?).

Beyond that, bylaws vary marvellously between Islands; some set out policies only, and others have subjected OCPs to clause-by-clause rewrites in a very short time-frame.

Salt Spring Island, which already deals with GHGs, densification, and density transfer in its OCP, has crafted a one-paragraph amendment in its draft bylaw N^o443: 'To support a reduction of 15% in Greenhouse Gas emissions by 2015; 40% by 2020 and 85% by 2050 based upon 2007 data. Within the local trust area this reduction will be achieved by actions resulting from individual and community initiatives, the actions of other levels of government, technological changes, and changes to land use policies and regulations.'

Galiano, where a new OCP is under construction, also makes do with a single page; its amendment bylaw N^o206 has already been sent to the Minister for approval. Denman Island's bylaw N^o198 deals with objectives and general policies only, such as electronic or virtual meetings of the LTC. Lasqueti's bylaw N^o86 contains motherhood statements and novel and ingenious actions, such as placing a chalkboard with rideshare offers at the Lasqueti ferry terminal. Mayne's bylaw N^o151 mentions 'smart growth,' compact and complete but *not* connected community, second-storey over commercial, density transfer, and amenity zoning (the last two are already in its OCP).

Saturna & North Pender—The Full Monty

Saturna's amendment bylaw N^o101 goes into some detail. It includes mixed commercial and residential, limiting floor area or lot coverage of single-family dwellings, second-storey dwellings over commercial, and permitting attached dwellings where current zoning permits more than dwelling on a parcel. This bylaw has its Hearing on Wednesday, April 28 (see Hearings schedule page 7).

North Pender Island proposed bylaw N^o182 makes detailed changes to its OCP. Twenty-six detailed amendments to the OCP have been proposed. The bylaw will be considered at a Public Hearing on Thursday, April 29.

This bylaw takes the form of a series of insertions into existing OCP clauses. However it is difficult to understand because it lists only the changes and additions, and the reader must constantly refer to the existing OCP in order to understand the effect of the revisions. The text presents,

as rationales, 'energy savings', 'climate change', and 'GHG emissions reduction'; these are not equivalent, and only add vagueness to the suggested amendments.

North Pender has about one-fifth the population of Salt Spring, and about 14% of the area. It therefore has considerably less potential for concentration of future growth, and less potential for GHG emission reduction from development concentration.

The bylaw adopts the government's 33% reduction target, which has been described on the Island as 'aspirational'.

Interestingly, bylaw N^o182 makes no specific reference to either density transfer, amenity bonusing, or to siting new development close to services—all measures which would potentially have a beneficial effect on GHG emissions. It supports the expansion of electronic communications and provides for attached 'secondary' dwellings.

The bylaw also permits second-storey residential units over commercial buildings.

In 2004, when higher density residential next to commercial was proposed, hundreds of people turned out to defeat bylaw N^o141 (see photo above and also www.islandtides.com, Archive).

Opponents to the current bylaw see it as a gateway to inadvertently increasing overall scattered density (and population) rather than a method to reduce GHG emissions. The Trojan horse in the bylaw may be a clause which states, 'The Local Trust Committee should review residential development potential and may consider changes to policies and regulations where the changes could limit or reduce greenhouse gas emissions.'

Transportation Not Density

It is clear that there are definite limits to the reduction in GHG emissions that can be achieved by landuse planning, and that these limits are well short of the 33% reduction target, suggested by the Province, which many Islands appear to be on the verge of adopting.

Islands, with their established scattered settlement patterns, need innovative transportation strategies, many of which are already being proposed. These offer a far greater potential for reducing GHG emission. However the regional districts are the appropriate local government to achieve this. (See also Editorial, page 4.) ☞

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