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Reprint from Volume 23 Number 13

June 30, 2011

Overcrowded meetings on Salt Spring —Christa Grace-Warrick

Salt Spring Island had a frustrating Solstice week of meetings. The Island's controversial riparian area bylaw came to public hearing on Tuesday, June 23. The meeting was held at Harbour House in Ganges, which has a seating capacity of 160 people. An unexpected 190 people turned up and the meeting was recessed to the next night at ArtSpring, which has a capacity of 448 people.

Clearly the previous night's overflow crowd piqued public interest, as 520 people turned up on Wednesday night. Overflow rooms with sound systems were used, but with the conversational buzz in the rooms, many were not able to hear. After a half-hour of preliminaries, the meeting was again recessed to the Saturday night at Gulf Islands Secondary School (capacity 1100).

Despite the huge crowds, only 24 people signed up on the speakers' list at Harbour House and another 25 added themselves at the ArtSpring venue.

Local Trust Committee Chair Sheila Malcolmson said there was no way to estimate the large crowd, as the largest attendance at a public hearing in the last ten years was 100 (at the OCP Update) and average attendance at the last 25 public hearings has been considerably less.

On Thursday morning, the Local Trust Committee decided to cancel the Saturday meeting until further notice. Committee Chair Sheila Malcolmson said, 'We did our best to accommodate the large group interested in the proposed bylaw, but after Wednesday night's meeting we heard two things that changed our minds about re-opening the public hearing on Saturday.'

'We heard that Saturdays in the summer are too busy for residents to attend meetings at short notice. We were also dismayed to hear, after the meeting at ArtSpring, that some people felt unsafe. We are committed to providing a safe and constructive environment for everyone involved to speak and be heard. We would also like to take some time to reflect on all the questions and concerns we are hearing from people. We hope that allowing more time before rescheduling the public hearing will give everyone an opportunity to understand the proposed bylaw and make constructive suggestions.'

The Local Trust Committee has received 30 individual letters in favour of the bylaw and 60 letters (mostly form letters) against it. Form letters, commented Malcolmson, are less helpful for understanding the issues. However she says, 'We appreciate the input we have received. We are listening and we need more time to digest it. We understand some questions remain about key areas of the bylaw and a public hearing is not the ideal venue to answer those questions.'

A riparian area regulation (RAR) bylaw is a requirement by the province. North Pender has completed its RAR, Galiano and Saturna are said to be close.

Bylaw N^o 449 can be viewed at the Islands Trust website: www.islandstrust.bc.ca/ltr/ss/pdf/ssbylamendocp0449.pdf or at the Islands Trust office in Ganges. ☞

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This article was published (June 30, 2011) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

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