



**Improving Capital Regional District
Service Delivery
on Salt Spring Island, BC:
options for positive change**

SUMMARY

prepared for the Positively Forward working group by
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About Positively Forward and this report

Positively Forward is a Salt Spring Island community group. It undertakes research and advocacy to advance improvements in local governance which also support the separation of the land use planning authority from the delivery of services.

The impetus for producing this report, *Improving Capital Regional District Service Delivery on Salt Spring Island, BC: options for positive change*, lies in the referendum on incorporation held in 2017.

The incorporation referendum stimulated intense community debate around differing models of local governance. It became clear that while the majority of voters supported the current governance system and, in particular, the Islands Trust and its mandate, many of those same voters were at times frustrated by the performance of the Capital Regional District (CRD) in delivering some services.

Positively Forward wanted to find out more about these concerns and look at how they might be addressed. The resulting report provides an overview of CRD service delivery from the perspective of islanders who interact closely with the CRD and know something of its strengths and weaknesses. The report acknowledges the many successes achieved within the CRD administration on Salt Spring. These success stories provide insights into why some Initiatives work. The purpose of identifying concerns and problem areas is to demonstrate a way forward, leading to improved service delivery.

Positively Forward hopes the report will become a catalyst for some changes within the CRD system. Equally important, we hope it will help inform the ongoing dialogue within our community about enhanced local governance.

Acknowledgements

Positively Forward is indebted to lead researcher Maxine Leichter for the months of research, writing and fact-checking she has donated to producing this report. Maxine Leichter has lived on Salt Spring Island (SSI) full time since 2003 when she emigrated from California. She is the President of the SSI Water Preservation Society, is a former Environmental Supervisor for the City of Los Angeles, served as an elected Director of The Three Valleys Municipal Water district in Los Angeles County and is an avid follower of SSI local government. We thank Elizabeth White for her help in editing the report. Elizabeth has co-authored and edited several publications for federal and provincial governments. She coordinated and edited the Salt Spring Island Climate Action Plan, authored associated reports, and has co-authored and edited a number of submissions for the Salt Spring Island Agricultural Alliance.

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of the thirty-two islanders —present and former CRD Directors, Commissioners, CRD management, staff and volunteers—who agreed to be interviewed and who together represent over 275 years of involvement with the CRD. Thanks are also due to the CRD Directors of the two other electoral areas who shared their approaches to their roles.

The authors have used direct quotes with attribution when permitted, and have been careful to respect all requests for anonymity. We have done our best to ensure that the information presented in this report represents the opinions of those interviewed. We apologize for any errors in fact or interpretation.

Positively Forward also acknowledges the work of the Salt Spring Community Alliance Governance Working Group (GWG) and their report. Several members of our committee participated in the GWG, and research conducted by the GWG informed this report. The two reports focus on different aspects of local governance and complement each other.

Summary and conclusions

The purpose of this report was to review Capital Regional District (CRD) service delivery on Salt Spring Island (SSI), to recognize achievements, document any reported problems, to identify possible causes and suggest solutions. The work was undertaken by the Positively Forward group in response to concerns raised in 2017 by islanders on both sides of the incorporation referendum question. This report complements a parallel report prepared by the Salt Spring Community Alliance Governance Working Group.

The preparation of this report, which took place over ten months, included the following steps:

- literature review, including a brief review of legislation;
- interviews with 32 individuals with substantial CRD experience;
- follow-up questionnaire with 28 of those individuals;
- analysis of responses;
- development of strategies to address identified issues;
- report writing, fact-checking, editing and review.

Overview of CRD services on Salt Spring

For the most part CRD provides and maintains infrastructure and delivers services on SSI reliably and efficiently. Much that has been accomplished by the CRD over the years can be attributed to a strong community involvement in decision-making, and partnerships between CRD management and various island groups. Examples include the Rainbow Road Pool, the Library, the Recycling Depot, the several kilometres of pathways constructed by the Partners Creating Pathways group, and Salt Spring's award-winning bus system.

The CRD delivers services on Salt Spring Island in four ways:

1. Directly by CRD staff—for example the emergency POD program, building inspection, and CRD bylaw enforcement.
2. By CRD staff guided by recommendations of a local Commission, such as Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) operations.
3. Through non-profit organizations paid for by SSI property taxes and other funds received through the CRD. These services include the library and the recycling depot.
4. Through contractors—for example Salt Spring Transit is operated by a private contractor, and North Salt Spring Waterworks District is contracted to help maintain several CRD water treatment plants and water delivery systems on SSI.

The majority of CRD services on SSI are provided through twelve SSI CRD commissions, seven of which are local water or sewer service commissions serving a small number of properties. Each commission was established through an Establishment Bylaw that defines its structure and authority. On SSI, the commissions are largely advisory and report to the SSI CRD Director.

The CRD is governed by a 24-member Board of Directors which approves SSI bylaws and the CRD budget for SSI. It is rare for the board to decline a request from the SSI CRD Director. They have little reason to do so since SSI pays for its own services and those services do not impact the budgets of other parts of the region.

The SSI CRD Director sets priorities for the activities of the SSI commissions and determines their annual requisitions, with advice from staff. The CRD Director has significant discretionary funds at his/her disposal. These include the gas tax funds allocated to Salt Spring from the Federal Community Works Program that are now over \$600,000 a year. The Director can ask the CRD Board to approve a pool of discretionary funds for a Grant-in-Aid program to support local initiatives. The Director can also create a fund to pay for administrative support.

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Regional district ratepayers pay only for services received. In the case of Salt Spring, with a few small exceptions, CRD ratepayers outside SSI do not help fund services specific to Salt Spring and Salt Spring does not fund services specific to other parts of the CRD. Salt Spring Island ratepayers do contribute to various CRD-wide services such as regional parks, hospital services, and emergency communications. In addition to island-wide CRD property taxes—which were \$939.81 for an average residential property in 2017—ratepayers receiving local water or sewer services in a local service commission area must also pay charges related to the costs of repairing, maintaining and replacing that infrastructure, which in some cases are considerable.

Interview and questionnaire participants and process

The 32 study participants had various roles with the CRD as follows:

- 3 current or former SSI CRD directors
- 4 current or former CRD staff
- 12 current or former CRD commissioners (island-wide commissions)
- 14 current or former CRD local water or sewer service commissioners
- 1 current or former consultants to CRD
- 10 other (includes various types of volunteer participation)

Many of the participants had served in several capacities. The average length of involvement with CRD was 9.8 years and the combined experience was over 275 years. For the interviews, each participant was asked to describe strengths and weaknesses of how CRD delivers services on SSI. The results were compiled and themes identified.

To find out how much the participants agreed on the issues, 54 statements taken from the interviews were organized into a questionnaire under three headings: CRD organization and management, CRD capital projects, and CRD commissions. A sub-set of statements was prepared for the local water and sewer service commissioners. The questionnaire was presented to 28 of the 32 study participants (those available and willing). The responses were tabulated and the 29 statements that were agreed by at least two thirds of respondents were considered representative.

Although the information provided was largely anecdotal, given the number of people interviewed, the in-depth nature of their experience with CRD, and the number of times that the same concerns were expressed, the findings likely represent a realistic summary of the issues and their causes.

Salt Spring CRD organization and management concerns

93% of respondents agreed that there should be a Salt Spring CRD Work Plan and Priorities List updated on a regular basis and available online, similar to the SSI Local Trust Committee (LTC). Of the 54 questionnaire statements, this had the greatest level of agreement. The SSI LTC includes an updated Work Plan, status of applications, and Priorities List in each public meeting agenda package; this is a model that the CRD could adopt.

Issues with CRD capital projects on Salt Spring

There is an accumulating backlog of SSI projects that have been approved and funded, but have not progressed in a timely manner. Examples include the North Ganges Transportation Plan and the Burgoyne Bay liquid waste facility. 82% of respondents agreed that projects could be completed more efficiently if qualified community organizations and volunteers were enlisted to help with certain aspects; and 81% of respondents agreed that it now takes an unacceptable amount of time for CRD to complete SSI projects that are funded and approved. One of the key causes for CRD's reluctance to use community resources was seen to be liability concerns, which 85% of respondents agreed should be addressed by finding solutions rather than by limiting assistance by commissioners, volunteers and organizations.

Difficulties with Salt Spring CRD commissions

Not all commissions reported issues, and problems varied by commission. Commissioners reported that obtaining information was often difficult. Commissioners have been told that all communications must go through the already very busy SSI CRD Manager. 86% of respondents agreed that commissioners should be permitted to hold informal working group meetings without the presence of staff. 81% agreed that their skills, and those of other commissioners, were not being utilized appropriately.

Issues facing CRD local water and sewer service commissions

Most of the 14 local water and sewer commissioners interviewed described serious financial and communication challenges that were reportedly causing hardship for local ratepayers, particularly those in small water districts. Commissioners expressed frustration at their inability to address the situation, and at difficulties in obtaining information. 71% of respondents agreed that operating and capital costs place an excessive burden on the relatively small number of properties serviced. 64% agreed that CRD made mistakes in design decisions leading to higher costs to water service or sewer service ratepayers.

Recommendations

Three strategies to improve information flow, accountability and representation

1. Provide a public, up-to-date Salt Spring CRD Work Plan with priorities and status reports.
2. Hold regular SSI inter-agency information meetings.
3. Establish an elected Salt Spring CRD Local Community Commission.

Five strategies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of all Salt Spring CRD commissions

4. Hold periodic public Salt Spring CRD All-Commission meetings.
5. Allow and encourage commissioners to meet in informal working groups.
6. Appoint a Salt Spring CRD Commission Coordinator.
7. Provide an annual orientation session for all commissioners.
8. Allow and encourage commissioners to take on tasks for which they are qualified.

Two strategies to assist the Salt Spring CRD Local Service (water and sewer) Commissions

The following two recommendations are specific to the seven CRD local water and sewer service commissions. Recommendations 4—8 above also apply to the local service commissions.

9. Provide local water and sewer service commissions with ratepayer contact information.
10. Initiate a consultation process with the local water and sewer service commissions on organizational improvements to better serve their ratepayers.

Two strategies to foster stronger relationships with Salt Spring residents

While the majority of our recommendations should help revitalize community relations, the following two recommendations focus specifically on the CRD's interactions with islanders.

11. Prioritize good community relations within CRD corporate culture.
12. Adopt a problem-solving approach.

Strategy to reduce costs and project delays

Our final recommendation highlights the importance of CRD partnerships with community organizations in providing timely and cost-effective service delivery.

13. Continue and expand service delivery by Salt Spring's not-for-profit groups, by local contractors, and by other local service providers.

Conclusions

The concerns we identified in the course of preparing this report run deeper than the usual complaints about "City Hall". They are more than the inevitable conflicts between rate-payers' requests and expectations and the community's willingness and ability to pay for new projects and programs.

Areas in need of improvement include accountability and representation; access to information; community relations, including use of community resources; project delivery; commission efficiency and effectiveness; and coordination and collaboration.

Accountability and representation rest at the political level with the CRD Director. The CRD Director's position is potentially quite powerful in terms of setting priorities and spending. There is also considerable flexibility in terms of the CRD Director's approach to the role, as we found out when we interviewed the other CRD electoral area directors. An elected Local Community Commission with decision-making authority would increase representation and accountability through regular and frequent public meetings.

The majority of the local water and sewer service commissions are so severely disadvantaged that they cannot function effectively. Some of their problems could be alleviated if they were provided with adequate and timely information about capital projects, repairs and maintenance, and costs, along with ratepayer contact information and a basic level of administrative support. The commissioners also need the ability to step in to undertake tasks for which they are qualified, rather than have ratepayers cover the cost of CRD contractors for every small job.

The CRD commissions are primarily advisory commissions and they advise the CRD Director, not CRD management. It is the role of the CRD Director to work with senior management, taking commission recommendations under advisement. Rather than the CRD SSI Senior Manager arrange, attend and directly oversee all SSI commissions, a more cost-effective and appropriate approach may be to engage a CRD Commissions Coordinator to support the commissions and ensure that each commission has the information needed, including input from management, to address the issues at hand.

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Salt Spring, like small communities across BC, has long relied on community resources—in-kind contributions from commissioners and other volunteers, local contractors who provide services, sometimes at cost or free, and non-profit organizations which serve the community in many ways. The continued use by CRD of community resources is essential to keeping service delivery costs commensurate with ratepayer ability to pay for them. Questionnaire responses indicate that current CRD senior management are discouraging expansion of the use of community resources.

In this report we recommend a number of strategies to address the issues identified by our research. Some of these are easy to implement “no-brainers”. We believe that all of them deserve a comprehensive review by the incoming CRD Director and senior CRD management. This review should include an analysis of Salt Spring’s CRD staffing and management needs, including administrative support for elected officials and commissions.

To conclude, most of the CRD services on SSI are delivered efficiently, the community appears motivated to establish a more positive relationship with the CRD, and the majority of the issues documented in this report appear resolvable, given strong leadership by the CRD Director.