

Driftwood April 17, 2024

Sustainability must guide OCP

Dear editor,

This February, Salt Spring Trustees requested \$246,000 in public funds for what they call a “major amendment” to our Official Community Plan (OCP) and Land Use Bylaw (LUB). All these funds are for hiring “third party contractors.” Since Salt Spring’s OCP had its last public review in 2008, one might expect that changes costing Trust taxpayers a quarter million dollars would indeed be for a full official review.

But rather than a comprehensive “review,” the words being used by our Trustees and staff are “update,” “amendment,” even “focused” and “targeted” amendment. The distinction is an important one. OCPs undergoing reviews must follow a set of key principles, foremost of which is the vision for the community’s future. This is the big picture exercise that guides changes to planning and land use decisions.

The vision is reached through extensive community engagement and dialogue. A good example is Sooke’s soon-to-be-completed OCP review. Sooke followed a standard planning model with four stages, the first two focusing on visioning and growth scenarios, the third on implementation of the vision, and the fourth on revisions and approvals.

We have to question why this important and logical process of community engagement is being ignored by our trustees. The answer seems to lie in the narrow focus the LTC has chosen. Housing development has become the key driver, specifically through the trustees’ Housing Action Program — which has so far given us the long fiasco of Bylaw 530. That failed because it was clearly unlawful under our existing OCP and relied wholly on the whims of private landowners.

While we welcome housing initiatives that are properly planned and regulated, we are also acutely aware that changes to our OCP must focus, above all, on the sustainability of human activities, which all depend on ecosystem health. Salt Springers have not only local issues to consider, but also our responsibilities under the Islands Trust Act. The need for the Trust to fulfill its conservation mandate has never had greater urgency, given the huge challenges posed by drought and climate change.

Sustainability means that build-out numbers are of key importance to the OCP’s long-term strategy for wise land use. Salt Spring is already growing at twice the national

average, clearly too much for a protected rural area. A key principle in amending the plan must be to foresee and manage development potential, whether it is realized today, tomorrow, or 50 years from now. How will the island reduce the carbon emissions and other environmental harms of our current population, let alone a larger one? All options, proposals or changes should be carefully analyzed through this lens.

If policies limiting growth are to be removed or weakened, islanders have the right to know the long-term consequences beforehand. This is our Plan. It will shape the community we live in and affect many aspects of our lives. Does the plan even need reviewing at all? If it does, it must be done right. All islanders must have an open process and a voice freely heard.

Patricia Lockie, Positively Forward

Ronald Wright, Keep Salt Spring Sustainable