

Coal mines. Oil tankers. Sea cucumber farms. Exorbitant ferry fares. It's pretty easy, here on Denman Island, to feel overwhelmed by external threats. Denman Islanders have a well-deserved reputation as fierce and effective grassroots activists, but we also need to ask, "What can local government do?"

Clearly, any Denman voice — grassroots or government — speaking up against, say, a proposed coal mine falls into the role of a tiny David facing a great big Goliath. But if that David is part of a federation...well, that makes him bigger.

The Denman Island Local Trust Committee, which makes land use decisions for the Island, is the tiny David in this analogy, and the Islands Trust Council, a federation of 13 Gulf Island governments, is the bigger David. As its weapon, the Islands Trust has something more sophisticated and less violent than a slingshot: an advocacy program.

The Trust has been carrying out advocacy since its birth in 1974 and in fact The Islands Trust Act, which created the Trust, clearly states that it is expected to do so. So — unlike a dude with a slingshot -- the Trust is legally mandated to protect its interests by influencing other agencies.

So what does advocacy look like? A recent example is the Trust's opposition to new oil pipelines. At its June meeting, Trust Council voted in favour of a resolution opposing pipeline projects that will expand oil export by barge and tanker from BC's coast.

As a result, press releases were issued, leading to articles in numerous BC newspapers. These quoted Islands Trust Council Chair Sheila Malcolmson warning about the risk of oil spills. And last month, Malcolmson spoke in Comox at the National Energy Board hearing on the proposed Enbridge pipeline, making a (hopefully) persuasive case about threats to the coastal environment and economies associated with the pipeline.

As well, Kinder Morgan President Ian Anderson has met with the Islands Trust Executive Committee about his pipeline plans, and in September Trustees from all Islands will attend an oil spill response information session. Also, Islands Trust representatives have put the issue on the agenda for action at the next meeting of the Union of BC Municipalities, and much bigger federation.

All advocacy is supported by Islands Trust staff, including a part-time policy analyst who helps choose the best strategies and build strong arguments. This too is driven by Trust Council, which has chosen to dedicate staff resources to advocacy.

Trust Council Chair Sheila Malcolmson has almost seven years of experience carrying out advocacy on behalf of the Trust. I asked her how much power the Islands Trust has to affect the policies of others.

"We don't have power," she stated. "But we have influence. For instance, if something is in the Trust Policy Statement or in an Island's Official Community Plan (OCP), it gets taken more seriously because it's been through a statutory process."

She provides an example from her own island: when Gabriolans were trying to preserve forest land, they added a policy to their OCP recommending that one particular crown land property, a quarter section that held the Island's last remaining old growth forest, be designated park and protected.

An OCP, however, is just a guideline. That recommendation was just words on paper, until an opportunity arose in the form of a new Federal Free Crown Land Grant Program.

"We said, look, this is in our OCP which reflects the desire of our community, and it's signed by the Minister. We also got letters from community groups and the Chamber of commerce — and we got it. It was the very first nature reserve created by that program."

In another example, about 10 years ago BC Hydro proposed a natural gas pipeline and processing plant right through the Trust area. Trust Council passed a resolution opposing both projects. It was the only government to do so. It took over four years, but both projects were defeated.

Malcomson is quick to point out that the Islands Trust does not take full credit for these sorts of victories. It's never as simple, or as isolated, as David slaying Goliath with one well-aimed stone.

"No one can say it is because of the Trust, or it is because of citizen opposition, or something else. The point is more about standing in solidarity with others, being on the record and doing what we can with the influence we have," says Malcomson. Ideally, government and non-government activism are mutually supportive. "When we write letters of opposition, for instance to the proposed Raven Coal Mine, hopefully grassroots activists are waving those around."

Local Trust Committees can propose topics for the advocacy program, and individuals and groups from the Trust area can address Trust Council at its quarterly meetings to lobby for attention to an issue. So far this term, The Denman Island Marine Stewardship Committee has spoken to Council, asking for action on shellfish aquaculture issues, and we look forward to hearing from Denman Opposes Coal this September.

