

## How to Be Wise: The Education of a New Islands Trustee

When I decided to run for Islands Trust, I figured that my biggest challenge would be making tough decisions. How to balance everything -- the plants and the critters, the land and the ocean, the past and the future, and all the diverse needs and dreams of our community? How, in short, to be wise?

So I was intrigued to see the topic "Making Fair Decisions" on the agenda for my orientation as a "newbie" Denman Island Trustee.

I can't say that the 90-minute session miraculously made me wise. But it certainly brought clarity, and illuminated some aspects of Islands Trust culture that had always puzzled me. I'd like to share some of what I learned, since it can be useful for anyone wanting to influence community life on Denman.

The principle of fairness, we learned, goes hand in hand with transparency, accountability, and integrity. It's a beautiful goal, but how to achieve it?

The answer to that question has two parts: attitude and action.

The attitude part of it sounds simple -- but in reality is challenging: have an open mind. This doesn't mean a decision-maker doesn't have passions and biases. The trick is to recognize these and not let them control you. It's like the bumper sticker says: "Don't believe everything you think." Keep listening.

The action part of fairness is entrenched by a number of practices and regulations. As an active community member, you may find some of them frustrating. But they are there to protect you, and all of us. Good intentions are not enough when dealing with elected officials, tax money and the creation of laws that affect communities, individuals and ecosystems.

**The Impartiality Rule** covers conflict of interest regulations, which most of us are familiar with. It also tells us "**Don't fetter your discretion,**" which means don't make promises. Don't promise your supporters, your favourite community group, your friend or *anyone* that you will vote a certain way on a certain issue. You need to keep listening, to everyone and to every piece of new information, until the moment of decision.

**The Hearing Rule**, more colloquially known as "**No back-room dealing**" sounds like a no-brainer, but the history of politics is full of back-room deals. Thus we were told: keep things public, always. Make sure everyone has a chance to hear all the information and the arguments, and allow everyone the chance to present info and arguments.

So while it may seem like common sense to you (if you are involved in a community issue or project) to set up a private meeting with the Local Trustees to present your case and work things out, you will probably be told no. Frustrating? Maybe, but consider how you'd feel if you'd heard the Trustees had met privately with an applicant for, say, a casino/resort in your neighbourhood, and had emerged with a plan-of-action.

*Everyone* needs to hear all the information and the arguments; *everyone* needs to have the opportunity for input. And political decisions, or discussions that lead to decisions, *need* to be made in a situation where the public is welcome to observe.

The Hearing Rule is behind regulations about giving advance notice of meetings and major decisions, and it shows up in practices such as not adding last-minute items to meeting agendas. These sometimes slow things down -- more frustration, but then again imagine the frustration of finding out that a beloved area of the Island was being altered through rezoning, and you didn't have a chance to research the issues and comment.

Another pre-requisite for fair decisions is "**The Evidence Rule**," also known as "**Knowledge-based Decision-making**." To uphold this, Trustees will put their staff to work doing research and providing background information. They'll make sure "facts" are accurate, and they often go out on the land to study and evaluate. Also, they'll likely look at how other Islands have dealt with similar issues and how that turned out.

The Evidence Rule means Trustees need to move beyond their own, and their community members', immediate emotional responses. In the end, they need to be able to explain their decisions rationally, so that people can understand them -- and challenge them, if they want.

All of this brings in a certain formality, and -- let's be honest -- an occasional tediousness to the process. But the payoff is big: intelligent decisions that stand a good chance of being in the best interests of our Island; fewer tax dollars spent on legal claims and fairness complaints; and, hopefully, an open, empowering and participatory political culture on our Island. If I can contribute to that, I'll be on my way to wisdom.