

Trust Council: Politics, Policies, PowerPoint Presentations and....Poetry

Four times a year Trustees from all 13 local trust areas meet for three days to make decisions on Trust-wide issues such as the overall budget, the strategic plan, and how to focus our advocacy initiatives.

Last month this group, known as Trust Council, met on Gabriola Island where we passed the 2015 - 2016 budget, after much thoughtful and sometimes heated deliberation. A big concern at the table was the size of our budget -- it keeps growing, although this year our tax requisition has not gone up.

There are ready answers to the question of *why* it is growing -- higher levels of government are downloading work to the local level, legislative requirements for consultation and due process keep increasing, technology gets more complicated, and salaries need to keep pace with our collective agreement, to name a few expense-producing issues. These answers are valid, but don't erase the concern. Trust Council's discussion reflected a widespread intention to look hard at our budget and see if and how we can cut back or hold the line.

But how to do so without cutting back on services and initiatives that our communities want and need, and without degrading the quality of what we do? Those are tough questions.

We had a particularly deep conversation about a proposal to create a new staff position: an Aboriginal Advisor who would provide support in developing relationships with First Nations, of which there are approximately 33 in the Trust area. This staff person would deliver training and advice to Trustees and staff, track changing legislation and ongoing treaty processes, and strategize on how and when to effectively engage in First Nations issues.

The original proposal called for a two-year full-time job; in the end, Council decided to scale this back to a budget amount of \$50,000 to be used in a yet-to-be specified way for First Nations relationship-building.

We also heard several presentations from Island residents, a number of which led to action. After a presentation on the David Suzuki Foundation's Blue Dot Movement, Trust Council voted to declare that all residents in the Trust Area have the right to live in a healthy environment. This may sound purely symbolic, but it's part of a movement to get this right enshrined, and thus legally protected, as part of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Council also determined a set of follow-up actions that will take this concept further.

For Trustees, Council was three long but often fascinating days of PowerPoint presentations, number crunching, and wrestling with complex decisions. Happily, amidst all the focus on politics, policies, and planning, we also found time for poetry! At our first dinner, we were honoured by a visit from Nanaimo's very first Poet Laureate, Naomi Beth Wakan, a Gabriola Island resident.

Naomi read us the following poem, which, she said, is "probably the only poem ever written about a branch of local government." Since April is UNESCO-declared National Poetry Month, and since Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi has challenged Canadian local governments to include poetry in their programs this month, I asked Naomi if I could share the poem. She graciously agreed.

(In light of the discussion above, regarding keeping our budget in check, I need to point out that Naomi's appearance was organized by the Gabriola Local Trustees as their personal initiative, and did not involve staff or Council time.)

The Islands Trust

Our island has beaches and forests
and wildlife and our life...
and all need protecting.
Our tides come in and recede.
You can't step in to the same wave
twice – we all know
that change is a constant, yet
how we long to preserve things
just as they are.
And that is why we trust the Trust.
We trust our beaches won't be stripped
of mussels and clams and oysters and sea-weed.
We trust our parks will stay parks
and our waterways stay clean;
and that the bays will stay sheltered,
the malls kept at bay, and that
developers stay bridled.
Rising each morning, fog or shine,
we still have hopes that
though we may age and wrinkle,
the things we came here for
will merely shake themselves a little
as the wind comes up from the beach.

By Naomi Beth Wakan – the inaugural poet laureate of Nanaimo. www.naomiwakan.com