



Islands Trust

George Grams and Peter Grove
Salt Spring Island Local Trustees
1-500 Lower Ganges Road
Salt Spring Island, BC V8K 1A4
Telephone: 250.537.9144
Fax 250.537.9116
Email: ggrams@islandsrust.bc.ca

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For the attention of Hon. Ida Chong
Minister for Community, Sport and Cultural Development
Room 323, Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC
V8V 1X4

Dear Minister,

REQUEST FOR A GOVERNANCE STUDY - SALT SPRING ISLAND

We, Salt Spring Island's current local trustees, stood for office because we believe in the mandate of the Islands trust and the need to preserve and protect our islands. We believe there is much to admire in the structure and management of the trust and, since election, we have offered and will continue to offer unqualified support to other elected officials and staff in the discharge of the duties which the trust mandate empowers. We recognize the value of the islands trust to the natural environment and wish to continue to play our part in that protection. However, our duty to those who placed us in office obligates us to explain why so many islanders have expressed a wish for a governance review.

Preserving and protecting the environment means much more than preserving and protecting the 'natural environment' and it is in that regard that islanders have expressed disaffection. There is a perception that the role of the trust is to promote the natural environment over other environmental components such as the physical, the economic, the social, the built and the cultural, particularly if the precautionary principle is used as justification for some protective land use decisions when empirical evidence and expert opinion has suggested no risk. As our island economy has declined in recent years, so has the perception that we need to elevate the relevance of some of those other environmental components to restore balance.

The choice is not between the natural environment and those other components. There is no reason we cannot satisfy all relevant factors of environmental wellbeing. Indeed, doing so is the challenge, and should be the goal, of a truly ecologically based society. The rise in the demand for change is not rooted in any negative intent towards the natural environment but in a wish to effect improvements in other aspects of island governance that are likely to be brought about only through legislative changes.

1. In the 2002 referendum, barely 30% of island voters opted for incorporation.
2. In a Gulf Islands Driftwood newspaper poll published on 21 September, 2011, 60% of Salt Spring respondents expressed a preference for Salt Spring to incorporate.
3. At the local government elections on 19 November, 2011, over 70% of Salt Spring voters cast their vote for trust candidates who campaigned for a provincially sponsored governance study.

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The above statistically independent events confirm there is a clear mandate in favour of a governance review on Salt Spring. The following issues are, in our view, the main reasons:

1. There is a perception that the current form of governance has not addressed the need to balance economic and social issues against those of the natural environment. As a consequence, demonstrably sustainable businesses have been forced to leave the island with the loss of a substantial number of jobs and tax revenue to the island.
2. A holistically healthy community must preserve and protect its natural environment but it must also nourish its economy through transitioning to an ecologically sound economic base. We cannot do that through land use decisions alone. Additional legislative tools are at the disposal of municipalities which are denied local trust committees.
3. Salt Spring Island furnishes the other trust areas with an annual subsidy currently amounting to approximately \$790,000. At a time of serious economic decline for the island, Salt Spring cannot afford to bear such a heavy burden of responsibility for supporting the other islands in the trust area. Financial support should come from a much broader base than Salt Spring Island.
4. Islands Trust taxes have nearly doubled since the 2001 referendum. During the same ten years and despite numerous efforts, Salt Spring, with approximately 40% of the population of the Trust Area, has had only 7.6% of the voting power on budget items at Trust Council. A weighted voting system on budget matters, similar to the Capital Regional District's, was proposed by a Salt Spring trustee during the 2002-2005 term, but, was defeated by trust council. Salt Spring is effectively neutralized on all budget matters by islands which are being subsidized by Salt Spring Island taxpayers.
5. The current system of governance is fiscally inefficient. A population of 10,234 with an annual budget of around \$18 million needs a homogeneous system of governance that ensures the budget is managed by one entity, not several that are disconnected. There is not even a mechanism in place that demands those separate entities meet.
6. With a population of 10,234, the workload for the two trustees on Salt Spring is so demanding that it is impractical for them to serve on trust executive and also fully service the needs of their island. We require a remedy for a system of governance that has the consequence of making it difficult for the largest and most populous island in the trust area to gain representation at executive level.
7. The offer by the Province to increase the number of trustees to four was defeated in a referendum held in 2011 because only two of the four would have represented the island on Trust Council. Pender, with a population of around 2,400 and a land area of around 13 sq. miles, has 4 trustees at trust council whereas Salt Spring, with a population more than 4x that of Pender and a land area over 5x greater, has only 2 trustees.
8. On Salt Spring Island decisions made by elected representatives can be vetoed by trust executive, none of whom reside on the island, none of whom were elected on island and who collectively represent a combined population (around 8,400) considerably smaller than Salt Spring's (10,234). Under municipal status, while the executive committee would still vet bylaw amendments, if they vetoed a bylaw, Salt Spring would have recourse via an appeal to the Minister.
9. Elected officials are more likely to display the diversity of opinion and balanced judgment that a population of 10,234 deserves if there are more than 2 representing their island population.
10. Any matter on which the two Salt Spring local trustees differ is determined by a politician (a) who the community has neither elected nor selected (b) who doesn't reside on Salt Spring, and (c) who, on average, spends perhaps a day on Salt Spring in any given month.

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11. Staff on Salt Spring are currently selected and appointed by management in Victoria that neither lives nor works on Salt Spring. That management is itself selected and appointed by other than island residents. A population of 10,234 warrants a local administration and a planning department that is answerable to residents through their elected representatives.

In closing, we draw your attention to the Islands Trust Policy Statement, clause 5.8.4 which states:

“Trust Council holds that island communities within the Trust Area are themselves best able to determine the most effective local government structure to support their local autonomy and specific community needs within the object of the Islands Trust.”

As elected representatives of our community, we are responding to the principles of that clause in asking the minister to implement an updated governance review. However, in accordance with our campaign commitments, we will not take an advocacy role nor recommend a system of governance. That is for the electorate to decide. Our duty is to help furnish them with the appropriate information, including a provincially sponsored governance study, that permits an informed decision to be made.

An examination of the 2002 governance study reveals that much of it remains relevant. Updating that report to factor in the changed circumstances since 2002 would seem to offer a less expensive and time consuming means of meeting the aspirations of islanders than commissioning an entirely new report. We believe islanders have made their wishes felt through the ballot box, and that the current economic circumstances impose some degree of urgency in answering those wishes. As trustees, we will do all we can to assist the minister in meeting the wishes and needs of island electors.

Yours sincerely,

George Grams

Peter Grove

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