



Housing Needs Assessment: What the Heck?

I've had some questions about the Islands Trust Housing Needs Assessment project, mostly along the lines of, "What the heck? Why do we need to do this? We *know* that we have housing needs here. Let's get on with *creating* affordable housing."

Here are some answers – not to rebut these sorts of questions, because creating affordable housing is absolutely the goal – but to put this initiative in context.

The Housing Needs Assessment is a Trust-wide project which is coming out of the Trust-wide budget (not our local budget). The final result will be a report identifying housing needs from the whole Islands Trust area. Each Island is being looked at individually, and also conclusions will be drawn for the region.

The assessments for each Island will combine quantitative information and analysis (based on census and other statistics) with qualitative information (based on interviews, reviews of past studies, articles, reports and other written information, and meetings with stakeholder groups).

The final product will serve a number of purposes:

- **Evidence and impetus for advocacy:** The new BC Government has renamed the former Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. This suggests there may well be real support for housing. The Islands Trust is interested in advocating directly to this Ministry, and perhaps others, to request dedicated funding for rural housing needs. To do this, we need solid, convincing evidence. The information can also be shared with Regional Districts and other organizations that can make a difference to housing availability in our region. Also, it can power up Islands Trust advocacy via the Union of BC Municipalities and other associations.
- **Support for funding:** Not just the Islands Trust, but also community housing associations all over the islands can use the Housing Needs Assessment as support for funding proposals. Many funders explicitly require a professionally-created Housing Needs Assessment in order to consider making grants.
- **Decision-making guidance for the Islands Trust:** The Trust does not have funding nor jurisdiction to build housing, but there is much we can do, from advocacy to education to zoning. We are tasked with making balanced, evidence-based decisions. When Council is debating its policies, and how to allocate resources, a housing needs assessment can provide the impetus to choose housing as a

focus. I don't think there is any trustee who would not want Council to work on housing issues, but we also want to work on climate change mitigation and adaptation, marine protection, forest conservation, finding sustainable approaches to tourism, First Nations reconciliation, and more, and we only have so much time and funding. A comprehensive study with good information can guide us towards effective action.

Denman Island already has several housing needs studies in place, and these have played a role in quite a few decisions that support affordable housing, such as creating policies in our Official Community Plan to support rezoning for affordable housing and seniors' housing, legalizing secondary suites and cottages, rezoning the Keystone affordable housing project and the Triple Rock Land Co-operative, and most recently, lowering our application fees for affordable housing rezoning proposals.

The current initiative will update and consolidate the Denman studies, and extend this tool to the whole Trust Area to create a consistent, harmonized, persuasive document.

Informally, we may feel we know plenty about housing needs. We've heard the stories – or lived them – of people living in mouldy outbuildings, couch surfing while trying to hold down a job or go to school, or having to leave the island. But for formal settings, where there is a tussle for money and attention between competing agencies and competing issues, where taxpayers' money needs to be spent, anecdotal evidence isn't enough.

It's true, the Trust-wide Housing Needs Assessment will *not* create affordable housing, but it *will* help Trust Council, Islands Trust staff, and community groups put conditions in place to make affordable housing more likely.

For more info on housing issues in the Trust area, go to <http://www.islandstrust.bc.ca/trust-council/projects/housing/>. If you're particularly interested in "getting on with things," I recommend in particular having a look at *Community Housing in the Trust Area* and the *Community Housing ToolKit*.