

Information and Misinformation on Denman Island

“Fake news” culture really hit home for me last month.

As an Islands Trust trustee, I deal with issues that can change people’s lives and influence our island in lasting ways. I need to make knowledge-based decisions. That means gathering *and evaluating* information. It means asking: Is this information accurate? Is it relevant? Is it complete?

This is true of all communal decision-making. It’s a complex business, partly because truth generally has a degree of relativity. But things go better when we check our facts, compare our stories, and study the evidence. If we don’t, we pay a price.

Both as a trustee and a community member, I’ve seen confusion about facts lead to messy decision-making, delays in projects, and costly mistakes. Not to mention heartache, destructive conflict, and lingering rifts between people. Last month, I got an education in how “fake news” works. I created misinformation, felt targeted by it, and saw other people hurt and confused by it. I also saw how it can be remedied by patient, honest communication, leading to fruitful, authentic conversations about what is true, and what isn’t.

I spent a lot of time saying things like, “Hmm, my information is different than yours. Could you check your source? And I’ll check my source.” I looked things up in documents and websites, sent out emails, made phone calls, and had meetings, all to get to the bottom of conflicting information.

I produced some misinformation myself, twice (on Facebook, not surprisingly). In both cases, I posted something that I actually knew to be incorrect. Somehow my mind just slid over that that knowledge as my fingers tippety-tapped on the keyboard. Looking back, I can see that I was moving too fast, and was too caught up in my own enthusiasm. I apologize for this.

Here’s what I wrote, and my corrections:

1) **“Denman Island doesn’t have a housing problem.”** Nothing could be farther from the truth! I could fill this whole newspaper with facts and anecdotes proving the opposite. What was I thinking?!? I was trying to make the point that we have lots of available infrastructure and that our regulations offer some flexibility, if only we could find a way to get these to work for us.

2) **“Ticketing can be useful for a quick response to environmental damage...on crown land.”** This was a reference to Islands Trust bylaw enforcement, but actually the Trust doesn’t have jurisdiction over crown land.

A couple of people contacted me privately to gently point out my mistakes. This was a good lesson in humility and also a reminder that **“fake news” is not necessarily a deliberate attempt to mislead**. Instead, it can come from a mixture of carelessness and out-of-balance passion.

My slip-ups weren’t, as far as I know, particularly damaging, but **sometimes misinformation leaves a trail of destruction**. In many places, it goes hand in hand with a knee-jerk populism that revels in outrage, gross exaggeration, finger-pointing, and scapegoating. I like to think that every time we slow down, ask questions, check sources, seek out different points of view, and listen to each other, we’re actively countering this.

I offer this Trustee Notebook as an exercise in raising my own awareness, and perhaps yours as well, about the ways we take in and spread information.

CLARIFICATIONS: Islanders have asked me to publicly clarify three misunderstandings that circulated last month. Here they are:

Why did I declare conflict-of-interest (COI) for the Denman Green project? Because this is required by Provincial legislation. Also, it is an ethical choice. I live next door and so could have a personal stake. This does not mean I necessarily *would* let personal interests sway my vote. But the fact that I *could* do so requires a COI declaration. This was not a) a way to stop the project, or b) a way to help the project move forward (I’ve heard both versions).

Is the Denman Local Trust Committee close to making a decision on the Denman Farmhouse Project? No. So far (May 17), we have not received an application from the Farmhouse project (an initiative to create a commercial enterprise next to the Gravelly Bay ferry terminal). If an application arrives, there will be a step-by-step process to consider it, with plenty of opportunity for public input along the way.

Are rezoning applications being held up so that they can be considered as a group? No. There is no plan to “batch” applications or in any other way delay them. This wouldn’t be good planning practice.