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Spring! Blossom Festival begins the dance of Salt Spring's season.

We who live here are lucky to celebrate a lifestyle in the midst of beauty. Our wonderful weather "season" is from now until the Canadian Thanksgiving Weekend in early October...this is a treasured location.

Is the government mandated Islands Trust control of growth the reason for the preservation of the environmental beauties of the Gulf Islands? I think so.

The Trust's mandate was to preserve and protect, for the benefit of all B.C. residents, the park-like allure of these islands, and it was put in place in 1974.

I think most residents and visitors would agree that this was a worthy goal, and that zoning restrictions were there to safe-guard the beauty.

When, though, does a loose body of regulations solidify into intransigence?

Isn't the point of elected representatives to interpret a regulatory framework, for the good of the overall community? In that interpretive role, isn't it essential to allow for individual responses without being afraid of the dreaded word precedent? Did the Trust forget the people?

A community's self-sufficiency is based on the ability of its population to maintain itself, to foster and encourage sustainable growth, to respond to changing times for the benefit of the entire community. Entropy is the result of an unchanging response. Entropy leads to the death of an organism.

Salt Spring has been blessed in past years to be what I call a stand-alone community. One did not have to leave the island for services/amenities unless one wished to...the island was not a bedroom community of towns on nearby Vancouver Island. Can we say this is still the case?

In recent years, did the elected trustees overstep their mandate and stray into lifestyle decisions of the residents? Businesses that gave work to local residents have closed and moved off-island. More may be considering this.

The big box stores in Duncan are only a 20 minute ferry trip away: Home Depot, Walmart, Rona, Staples, London Drugs, plus the satellites that go along with plaza life (Starbucks, Tim Hortons, KFC, et al).

The Chamber of Commerce also has a mandate: to support local/community businesses and to create an atmosphere of opportunity for them. It is a volunteer body.

Salt Spring, as part of the Islands Trust governance model, is not a municipality. There are two elected trustees per Gulf Island. There is also a CRD director...CRD stands for Capital Regional District. This is also an elected position. As an unincorporated area, Salt Spring is under Victoria's CRD re building permits, septic installations, etc.

One can see, though, as population slowly grew, since 1974, that there was a void there. The Trust is about land use bylaws. The CRD is about granting septic and building permits, so that construction is to current code requirements. There is no local elected mayor/council to aid the community's progress.

What about an overall plan to ensure that residents lifestyles are also encouraged and preserved?

There is no funding from the provincial government to the local Chamber, as the Island is not a municipality. Thus, Chamber activities to benefit local businesses are all volunteer driven...with monetary support for tourism related events raised from the same local businesses.

The economic meltdowns between late 2008 and late 2012 caused tourism to halt in all secondary home/discretionary areas. On Salt Spring, tourism in 2010 & 2011 was apparently down by 40%. This affected accommodations, restaurants, studios, galleries, real estate...which in turn affected lawyers, contractors, architects, etc. It's a wheel that rolls or else falters and collapses.

There is, at the moment, a sense that no one has been looking after the preservation of the Island's lifestyle...no one helping the residents.

When I arrived in 1989, it seemed that "everyone" was here: affluent, old hippies, artists, farmers, retirees, young families, teachers, nurses, ferry employees, retail owners, summer people, spec builders, etc. Just the normal mix in any small rural community.

So...what happened?

Is it just the law of unintended consequences at work? Is it that those initial regulations to address uncontrolled growth have spawned into more regulations, narrowing interpretations of original bylaws, simply to fill a void?

The community did seem, in the 80s and early 90s, to work together...it still comes together to help when someone is afflicted with an accident or loss by outside circumstances. There now, though, also seems to be a very divisive attitude in evidence...fixed positions...no conversation of negotiation.

I sense that Salt Spring is well on its way to being a safe haven for an affluent buyer. It may be that those who service such an area will be coming from off island. The Trust's point in 1974 was to preserve the park. This was accomplished.

A decision to control growth in a beautiful area does have the effect of making it a place one has to be able to afford. The Trust created, on all the Gulf Islands, an eventual outcome of being expensive places to live. The old adage of supply and demand in play.

It is what it is.

The Trust could have created thoughtful affordable housing zonings, industrial land groupings, & thus have preserved small family businesses, that hire locals, that support other local businesses. They did not.

Currently, there is a governance study underway on Salt Spring. There will be an eventual referendum to decide whether or not to have a Gulf Islands Municipality. This is the second such study/referendum process.

If a yes vote? The Trust would remain, with two elected trustees, and the bylaws in place. The CRD role would be taken over by an elected council, on Salt Spring, and so there would be local people in place to look after lifestyle options for the residents. The encroachment of the Trust into this realm, to fill a void, would end. The Trust, its elected local trustees, and its land use controls would remain.

Very recently, the CRD has struck a committee known as the EDC (Economic Development Committee). This committee has pulled people from local groups such as: accommodations, tourism, chamber volunteer groups...is it a think tank? Is it working to fill that local presence void, in case the governance study outcome is a nay vote? Are your concerns being met? Ask questions!

Is incorporation a good idea for Salt Spring? Attend the meetings, listen with an open mind. It's an important issue with a serious outcome, on either side of the question.

My hope is that Salt Spring Island will remain that vibrant stand-alone community structure, with opportunity for all population segments. How best to ensure this?

Be a part of the decision making...it's your island, after all. Be informed.

Tourism engenders real estate outcomes and thus ensuing good business outcomes for all other enterprises. Another reason to support the Chamber of Commerce.

The real estate market on Salt Spring Island, the Gulf Islands, and on Vancouver Island is still slow in sales. There is an increase in interest...inquiries are stronger...there is no marked trend, yet. In 2012, most sales were in entry level residential. In the final months of the year, some upper tier priced residential options found their buyer...at reduced price points from list pricings. Undeveloped land and commercial options remained "flat" throughout 2010, 2011, and 2012.

It may be that 2013 will be a year of authentic recovery in real estate in our secondary home/discretionary area. It may take until July to see this build in. The main sales now take place, in our seasonal marketplace, between mid-July and November. With the impact of the Internet, it's important to be listed and "present"...otherwise, how will the searcher discover a specific property? Perhaps by early May, the trend-line for 2013 will be sufficiently in place to see a pattern.

The driver to action this year may be the seeking of a safe haven. Preservation of capital and the ability to be self-sustaining are powerful motivators to action. The cash on the sidelines may be flowing back into secondary home markets, and globally so. The issues in Cyprus, towards the end of March, may have hastened this shift out of cash, held in savings, in financial institutions.

Many insecurities abound, globally, and the Gulf Islands are not exempt.

What can we appreciate? A micro-climate that enjoys a year round opportunity, farms and the 10K diet are alive & well. The best protected boating waters in the world, at our doorstep. Ecological beauties to enjoy. Creative & thoughtful people to bring forward solutions to 21st Century issues. Lucky us, we who now call this region "home".

May I help you to discover your special property on Salt Spring Island, on the Gulf Islands, and on Vancouver Island? Your best interests are my motivation. Please call...look forward to meeting you, and to helping you become an Islander, too!

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