

Warning: Graphic and Disturbing Content

By PAUL BRENT

Saturna Island Trustee

I know, that is a strange and provocative title, but it's used purposely, because I want people to pay attention to this.

And “this” is the Islands Trust process to rush through a colossally modified “constitution” equivalent — the Trust Policy Statement — without truly any meaningful dialogue with our islands.

You may have already seen some correspondence regarding concerns voiced by other islanders regarding the massive changes envisaged by the Trust's draft policy statement first unveiled last month. It's a document with the potential to cause a tectonic shift on how our lands (and waters) are managed on our islands.

The Islands Trust Policy Statement is a 30+ page document that guides what our official community plans should/shall contain, and from there, how our bylaws must be constructed. The significant changes to the policy statement being proposed by Trust staff will make major changes to our OCPs, particularly as the existing draft policy statement moves to directing that which must be, rather than that which should be. And that is but one of many elements the draft policy statement is changing.

Saturna's OCPs were arduously crafted through huge community efforts over years. The current OCP will change if the Trust has its way, and in a process that negates the early and meaningful consultation we all have come to expect for even the most minimal of bylaw changes.

Yes, the Trust introduced the first draft of the 37-page revised policy statement to a public meeting of a working committee of the Trust early last month. It was sent back for rework, noting that community and other key elements were notably absent, notwithstanding that trustees had pointedly advised staff to include it in the revised policy statement. The second draft was released on the web on Friday, June 11 after 5 p.m. for review by that same committee on June 15 so that it could be brought before the Trust Council (all 26 Islands Trust representatives) for first reading.

Yes, that's right. The foundational document upon which the Trust uses to guide its policies was introduced May 3 and is now to first appear (on Zoom) to Trust Council on July 8 for first reading.

Why the rush? In their May 14 briefing to the Trust Programs Committee specific to timing, the Islands Trust briefing document says: “Staff also wish to highlight that First Nations have been working within the timelines outlined below for the last two years and have an expectation that the bylaw will be adopted during this term of office.”

Yet in their June 15 briefing document, Islands Trust staff write this:

“It is important to note that First Nations have been working within the timelines outlined below and have an expectation that the new Policy Statement bylaw will be considered for adoption during this term of office.”

Which is it? Adopted this term or considered for adoption? Words are important.

If the Islands Trust staff speak on behalf of First Nations, we need to know what First Nations want. Does the Islands Trust speak on behalf of all First Nations in the region, or only those they've consulted with?

The other point Islands Trust staff has made in favour of this accelerated process was that if the new policy statement were not adopted (first, second and third readings, blessed by the Executive Committee and then signed by the Municipal Affairs Minister for receipt and final adoption) this term (by October 2022), they would have to “educate” new trustees. That must be a big hill to climb, and some trustees might wonder who works for whom, and whether education might be a two-way street.

But would delay of first reading to a later date preclude adoption this term? No, ample time still exists to do so. And were the draft policy statement to go through to third reading and off to the minister in, say, September 2022, would this change the minister's mind about final adoption in the months thereafter? Highly unlikely.

So where is the issue? Is there consensus amongst elected officials on the timelines? Certainly not from the meeting on June 15 with 10 of the 11 Trust Programs Committee trustees present. At that meeting, half the trustees voted to delay the policy statement going to first reading to allow resident communities to have their say. And half were opposed. Hardly a consensus.

And to illustrate the lack of consensus, at the same meeting, a vote was taken to remove “housing” from the draft policy statement. Half the trustees also voted in favour of that. Again, half opposed. So ask yourself, is this truly a document that has been thoroughly vetted and ready for first reading?

You might also ask, why wasn't the draft policy statement introduced for discussion at the full meeting of 26 trustees at Trust Council on June 8, 9 and 10? That was a decision of the Trust. In my view, it reinforces the bizarre nature of this process, which seems more focused on pushing this bylaw through as quickly as possible without considering the public interest.

We are hearing concerns from residents about this draft policy statement, about the Trust's focus on diminishing the role of agriculture and taking control of all forestry and tree-cutting activities, banning private docks and forcing OCP changes on islands. You may hear that the Trust has deemed the defining of words and phrases in the Trust Policy

Statement as in need of change and “has suggested a move away from fixed academic (mostly colonial) ‘definitions’ in favour of more context-specific ‘interpretations’.”

These are all directions that may or may not be what islanders ultimately wish to embrace. But first, we need to have appropriate public consultation, ahead of first reading so that we, like the First Nations whose territory we gratefully live upon, can provide our early comments on both content and timelines, before it’s brought to first reading.

I urge you to write to Premier John Horgan and relevant ministers (see below) to request that the Islands Trust engage with the residents and property owners of the Trust area prior to pushing this to first reading, respecting the early and full public consultation we have come to expect as a normal process. Only by this measure will we protect the public interest of the constituents of our islands.

Premier of BC, John Horgan – john.horgan.mla@leg.bc.ca

Minister of Municipal Affairs, Josie Osborne – josie.osborne.MLA@leg.bc.ca

Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Lana Popham – lane.popham.mla@leg.bc.ca

Minister of Indigenous Relations & Reconciliation, Murray Rankin –
murray.rankin.MLA@leg.bc.ca

Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations & Rural Development, Katrine Conroy – FLNR.Minister@gov.bc.ca