

Bowen Island OCP Update 2009 Submission
Submitted by Living Bowen and Others

Bowen Island, being an island municipality within the Islands Trust, is distinctly different from all other communities in Canada and needs a unique model of governance that will ensure its long-term protection, preservation and conservation, cultural/social character and economic sustainability. As one island within a valuable group of islands making up a highly vulnerable coastal eco-system and supported by the Island Trust, Bowen has a vital role: that of a city-adjacent carbon sink; an important piece of a natural and protected coastal inventory of our larger world; and as a place of natural beauty offering serenity, retreat and sanctuary for residents and visitors alike.

Our key message: We strongly advocate, for Bowen Island, an approach of highly focused land-use planning, which works backwards from a vision of a built-out future island rather than an open-ended process. An island is by definition “finite” in geographical and natural resources terms. Attempting to define the “finished product” – the future Bowen – based on established island values and goals forces one to make tough choices and recognize how decisions made today limit choices in the future. This approach will require change – both adaptability to change and ability to enact change in support of a master plan for a green and livable island and to help the community achieve its vision. Local governance should be strongly aligned with stated community principles and values in its decision-making processes including the updating of by-laws/regulations. These may include taking the lead in these areas such as: “in-character” building guidelines, dark skies bylaw, innovative land uses, incentives to encourage voluntary compliance and positive change, protective/assertive zoning, private land conservation (e.g., donations/covenants), facilitating island-appropriate solutions for density/affordable housing and growth management, expanding transit and supporting transportation alternatives (e.g. electric cars, scooters, bikes), advocating for change in external regulations, and so on --with the aim to envision and facilitate a future Bowen we can all recognize and call home. The most powerful role a government can play is being a catalyst and enabler.

We envision a future *built-out* island that is developed through consideration of the following list of top-down priorities: **firstly**, environment/ecology considerations and natural resources determines population; **secondly**,

population determines the development, infrastructure and economic growth; *thirdly*, population demographics (and desired demographics) determines the type, density and location of housing, and the composition of local businesses and services. Given the required brevity of this submission, we first discuss the required decisions regarding land use, and then focus on what we define as our highest priority: **to preserve and protect this special place in the natural world, and to provide a place of natural beauty, respite and serenity for all B.C. residents**, while nurturing our own rich and diverse community in harmony with its natural surroundings.

Land Use: The “Built-Out” Bowen

We propose the adoption of an approach to planning that first determines (as much as possible) the ideal percentages and distributions of land uses in the “built-out” future island. This would involve defining (1) the various types of land uses that are desired, (2) the relative percentages of these land uses at present and in the projected “built-out” island, and (3) the location of these various land uses on the island at present and when built-out”.

What various types of land uses are desired? Answering this question requires that we first determine a vision for Bowen Island, recognizing that Bowen cannot be all things to all people. It is essential that we keep in mind, as we update the OCP, that Bowen Island is *not the same* as other municipalities in the lower mainland, in spite of similar challenges to human systems (e.g. the high cost of housing, growing populations) and to natural systems (e.g. environmental degradation, climate change). Bowen Island is an island municipality within the Islands Trust. As such, we are required, through provincial legislation, to address the needs of *all* residents of British Columbia to have access to wild, protected places. In order to clearly distinguish each type of land-use, we propose to describe these as: (1) “modified landscapes” such as parkland/green spaces used by people; (2) “wild” protected natural lands with managed access, and (3) people/infrastructure, including agricultural , commercial and natural resource use including the adjacent marine environment.

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What should be the relative percentages and locations of these land uses? Answering both of these questions requires that we have a significantly improved understanding of the Bowen landscape and environments. A comprehensive and complete *environmental study of our natural inventory* should be completed utilizing state-of-the-art modeling software and incorporating previous and current work underway in these areas (e.g. Bowen Geolibary project). In order to create a vision of the future Bowen, we need to know what the end vision should look like, and also where we are presently in the context of that vision. We also need to know exactly what natural assets we have and what impacts our land-use decisions will have.

There is a growing environmental trend underway world-wide of “restoration and re-establishment”; that is, attempting to restore damaged and lost environments. Restoration is neither easy nor inexpensive. Let us be ahead of the curve and protect our finite natural assets now. We must also recognize that modified green spaces such as parks where people recreate *do not* offer the same quality of protection for ecology as do wild forested areas.

Some Principles of Island Protection & Conservation

That a significant percentage [to be determined] of the available green lands should be set aside and preserved for ecological conservation, habitat/species protection and retention of vital natural resources – in perpetuity.

This includes supporting the goals of “contiguous forest” (e.g., Greenways initiative) to ensure the natural ecosystems that are preserved continue to be viable and productive for terrestrial and aquatic wildlife.

To employ the precautionary principle of erring on the side of safety and “redundancy” – that is, to preserve and protect more of the natural, wild areas than we think we need. To protect natural areas from risks we cannot control such as wildfires, disease, climate change, weather, etc., a great deal of nature redundancy is required. Set aside as much as possible to account for the unforeseen.

To employ a principle of “restoration or habitat compensation” -- that is for every significant withdrawal from the natural inventory, an equal or compensatory deposit goes back to the natural system for both private and

public lands. For example, if significant trees are removed for development/views, similar trees are planted elsewhere on the property, or if not feasible, on crown or park land. Or, if this is not practical, then payment into a *conservation/restoration fund* is required. Methodologies for quantifying and cost-valuing environmental assets and services, including trees, exist. And, for new buildings, perhaps a requirement to plant significant buffers of native trees and shrubs along the property perimeter to mitigate the effect on neighbours and to retain natural inventory.

For necessary and approved new housing (subject to other principles of island capacity), an approach of first building out from our existing development footprint, wherever possible, in order to avoid new intrusion on remaining wild, natural forested areas. This may or may not be possible depending on geographical factors, property ownership, or crown and private land constraints but should be a goal. Identifying and protecting “green” areas, an environment-first approach, will make it more clear where development should occur and to what extent.

Bowen Island: Our Community and Eco-System

The focus of our submission has been on what we define as our highest priority: *preservation of the natural environment*. We conclude by briefly considering our community and addressing issues of population growth and local economy/services.

We advocate a “slow-growth” policy that encourages a pace of growth that does not overwhelm the island’s environmental or community capacity; an ecological approach to planning that governs and manages Bowen Island as a healthy eco-system and maintains permanently the critical balance of natural “habitat” and humans/other species necessary to ensure a healthy island eco-system.

We recognize that, to protect environmental and social values requires a particularly delicate balance of community rights/needs and individual ones. At times, a community or environmental need may take precedence over that of the individual;

We support planning for demographic diversity through a increase of rental/leasing choices and some reasonably priced market housing, e.g. clustered, small footprint design with appropriate, well sited density; as well, we must have an implementation plan that serves the needs of existing residents of Bowen first and with

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consideration given to other low impact solutions (e.g. approved cottages or “small house” accessory buildings) that may reduce the need for new sub-divisions and housing developments;

We support an economic/business model that responds to the needs of the community and provides a good living for the owner/family and employees, but does not “drive” population growth and planning; we also support low-impact, small-footprint and environmentally benign businesses that are compatible for small island living.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, Bowen Island living is as much about what it “isn’t” as it is about what it “is”. Many people choose island living for what it doesn’t offer -- e.g. distinctly urban amenities and franchises, high taxes to fund high infrastructure, noise, 24/7 lights, crowding, pollution and crime. And, in turn, they may forgo some level of expectations around convenience, expedient commuting and some familiar comforts and amenities. Island living is different by definition and requires a planning and governance model tailor-made to preserve and enhance its island character and valuable natural assets for perpetuity.