

[This is my manuscript original, and may differ somewhat from what was published]

Gabriola Governance Review Committee Sunday, June 27, at Surf Lodge

The committee came to order with eleven members present—Jim Ramsay, Rick Jackson, Pat Murphy, Verna Gregson, Diana Moher, Paul Melin, John Hall, David Brown, and ex-officio non-voting members Sheila Malcolmson, Gisele Rudischer, and Gail Lund.

Discussion of the agenda. Sheila Malcolmson suggested that listening to the views of the public be moved to the top of the agenda, but there was no support or comment on this.

After routine business, the committee turned to discussing the Thursday meeting. It was noted that there had been an excellent turn-out. A casual inspection of the evaluations forms indicated a range of opinion that was on all sides of the spectrum; however, no analysis of the responses had been made. It was regretted that the technical report had only been made available at eight o'clock on the morning of the meeting. It was the intention to post the evaluation responses verbatim on the website, which was now up and running.

Various other technical communication problems were being addressed or had been fixed.

Turning to the question of reaffirming the committee recommendation to the minister. The e-mail from Derek Trimmer at the ministry to the committee was read in its entirety, which was as follows. Copies of this e-mail had been handed out to the public at the door by a member of the public:

[omitted]

At the conclusion of the reading of the e-mail by the chairman, who was duly thanked for so doing, it was moved and seconded that option 1 be adopted.

In summary, the discussion went as follows:

Diana Moher: The committee should be looking at public opinion and not making a decision based on the content of the technical report. The e-mail made it clear that the committee was entitled to use a variety of ways to judge the feeling of the public.

Jim Ramsay: The problem was that the information [at the Thursday meeting] was not available to the public much in advance and this clouds the issue.

Gisele Rudischer: The committee seemed to be in a habit of failing to bring out information on time, the lack of an analysis of the evaluations for the current meeting being just the latest example. The Thursday meeting was the first that the committee had had where there was input from the public. The committee should listen to the people. As an elected representative, would recommend that the process be ended.

David Brown: The democratic way to decide this is by having a vote. It's been a long five year process and the committee has no scientifically-determined information on public opinion and shouldn't make judgements on what it might be. People speaking at public meetings may not represent majority opinion.

Verna Gregson: We have been talking about this for a long time and it is clear that, among those with strong opinions, there are three camps in the community—yes, no, and let's not have a vote. Supporting the "let's have no vote" position is unfair and unprincipled.

Rick Jackson: Role of the committee is to gauge public opinion as to whether there is an interest in having a vote. After talking to many people on Gabriola got the strong feeling that there was no interest in doing this. Thursday's meeting re-inforced that judgement. Found the reading of the meeting as "50:50" rather curious when the e-mail and conversations with those present indicated a landslide vote in favour of not proceeding.

John Hall: Many people who spoke at the meeting were against having a vote, which is undemocratic. Not many spoke against the idea of incorporation itself.

Gail Lund: This is not a good time for the committee to be voting; would be better after the public has had time to study the information presented at Thursday's meeting.

Pat Murphy: The committee is in the odd position of recommending that the community decide and yet is being criticised by the community for doing that. Can see no issue in the technical report that would clearly be a decisive one. Wrong for a small group like the committee to decide on behalf of the community.

Rick Jackson: That's the fear of those against the idea of incorporation that a small group of councillors would be making all the decisions. There is a strong feeling in the community that this is being rammed through.

Paul Melin: The only way to settle this is to have a vote. The matter requires a lot of thoughtful consideration and it's not up to the committee to decide.

Rick Jackson: The committee's job was to get the feeling of the community. That was done and I voted accordingly.

Diana Moher: Anecdotes, which was the method used by the committee to judge public feeling, is questionable and not valid. For some who want change, the process is too slow. For some who need more information, it is too fast. The poll on Thursday night was a better way of judging public feeling. Concern about the impact of incorporation on the farmers.

Sheila Malcolmson: Disagreed with the e-mail that a no vote would provide closure. Another vote could be called for at any time as evidenced by Bowen and Saltspring. Not afraid of the outcome of any vote but very concerned that the process is divisive. The island has had more than its fair share of conflict—Weldwood, logging, Duke Point, and emergency dock, and pending home-based business regulation and groundwater management. Yes side is not espousing solutions; this is not the time to be having a vote on incorporation. It should wait until there is an important (hot-button) issue where a change of status would be a factor in possible solutions.

Verna Gregson: This is an issue and a fearful element should not be allowed to interfere with the democratic process.

OUT OF ORDER INTERJECTION FROM PUBLIC

Ministry includes withdrawing the recommendation to have a vote as a valid option for the committee. Strong resentment at being called a fearful element just because critical of the process. "VOTE NO" pamphlets tabled by some members of the public present.

ORDER RESTORED

At this point the vote was called: voting was 6-2 in favour of reaffirmation, only Diana Moher and Rick Jackson voting against.

At the end of the meeting, members of the public were invited by the chair to comment on the earlier proceedings during which the committee voted 6-2 to reaffirm their recommendation to the provincial government that a vote be held to determine whether the people of Gabriola wanted to remain a rural community, or whether they wanted to move on to becoming a municipality.

The comments were received by the committee in an orderly, and for-the-most part commendably civilized manner. Everyone present was given an opportunity to express their uninterrupted thoughts, and to take as much time as they wished to do so.

Although I may have missed one or two people, by my count only seven of thirty-three people invited to speak declined to do so. Of those that did express an opinion, fifteen explicitly said that in the event of a referendum vote they would be voting no (58%), while three explicitly said they would be voting yes (12%). If you make the assumption, and it is an assumption, that those critical of the process would also be voting no even though they didn't say so, then the number of those who feel negatively about the process and who will vote no becomes twenty (77%).

However the main focus of the responses was not on the outcome of the vote, but on the process that had led to the making of the recommendation to the minister. Of those that expressed an opinion, sixteen (62%) explicitly complained about the process, while six (23%) positively approved it.

Nobody went out of their way to say that they were pleased with the coverage of the local newspaper the Sounder, but five (19%) criticized the coverage as being biased, but also, one person mentioned, guilty of using vague and loaded words.

Although I did not keep track of those expressing gratitude to the members of the committee for all their hard work, several people did, including some who were critical of the process, and my subjective feeling was that most would have added an acknowledgement had they been prompted to do so. Only one really negative comment, to the effect that the committee members would be unelectable in any municipal election, was made.

On the issue of process, practically everyone in favour were so on the grounds that they welcomed an opportunity to vote, which was, they said, the democratic way to settle a division of opinion. Concern was expressed by some in the yes-camp that the information

flow would not be good for people living off island but who were entitled to vote by virtue of owning property here.

The complaints against the process were (1) the committee had made no credible effort to determine whether the people of Gabriola wanted a vote; (2) the majority committee were voting according to their own personal convictions rather than reflecting the view of the community; (3) the committee was unconstitutional in that it included members who were not full-time residents of Gabriola, and in one case, a voting member who neither lived or owned property on Gabriola; and (4) the voting procedure should have allowed the three ex-officio members to have a vote just like everyone else.

With regard to determining whether people wanted a vote or not, the committee made its decision in an admitted “vacuum of public interest”. The method they used was, according to the committee chair, talking to people in the community—“anecdotal” was his word—and listening to the opinions of those few members (typically 30) who did attend the meetings. The committee’s interpretation of this evidence was that there was no overwhelming feeling in the community in favour of the status quo.

Critics argued that the disinterest in the process demonstrated disinterest in holding a vote; that the decision to recommend a vote should have been taken after not before information about the options was provided to the public; that the committee tried to avoid hearing public opinion at the meeting on Thursday, 24 June, when they should have been soliciting it; that the results of those evaluation forms that were collected at the meeting (there may not have been enough for everyone) were not available even to committee members before the committee passed its reaffirmation vote; and that committee members were not distinguishing between their personal opinion (including one member who voted against) and their mandate to reflect public opinion.

I sensed that, more than anger at the committee’s decision, there was a great feeling of exasperation on the part of the public present, and of two of the committee’s voting members, at the failure of the committee to engage the public, even at this late stage, in any meaningful dialog on the issue. The cry, “you don’t want to listen” captured this. Input from the ex-officio elected members on the potential divisiveness within the community was discounted, even though evidence for that can already be observed.

Expressions of opinion in favour of a yes-vote mainly centred on the idea that as a municipality we would have more control over local issues that need to be dealt with, especially groundwater issues; and that the Islands Trust is sometimes in an inferior bargaining position when it comes to representing the island. One contributor inferred that the Islands Trust governance is not “transparent”.

Expressions of opinion in favour of a no-vote were much more wide-ranging and were expounded at length by several contributors to the discussion. They included (to put them very briefly) higher taxes; coming here to get away from an urban environment; the inadequacies of the financial report produced by the committee’s consultant (one evidently experienced critic went into this in great detail); the risk of the election of a pro-development council; the implications of the Community Charter which would heavily favour the election of business people to a future council; the potential lowering of the environment as a governance priority; a severe, perhaps fatal, weakening of the Islands Trust and its ability to

“preserve and protect”; the failure of yes proponents to identify “problems” that a change of status would solve; and potential adverse taxation effects on the farmers, which is a concern to people on both sides of the issue.

With regard to the Sounder coverage, one severe critic who writes for the paper publicly resigned on the grounds that the coverage was not balanced, and that the newspaper’s proprietors were of the opinion he claimed, that the Islands Trust is dysfunctional. Nobody inferred that this pressure was the reason for Bruce Mason’s biased reporting—he clearly is a man with his own firmly-held views—but there was a feeling that the paper is guilty of distortion by selectively reporting the facts. Particularly strong was the feeling that the charge that the participants in the Thursday meeting were being undemocratic when the “straw” vote clearly showed the overwhelming majority of those present to be against proceeding with a vote; and the charge that those publically expressing strong views against the idea of becoming a municipality were somehow “threatening” or “obstructing” the community.

All in all, I was left with the feeling that a cancellation or postponement of the vote would indeed reflect majority community opinion, but would undoubtedly severely anger the yes proponents, even in spite of the fact that holding a vote and having the no-side win would not be as favourable to their cause as would be a postponement.

Badly lacking is any indication as to what extent the opinion of those attending the recent meetings reflects opinion at large. If the decision is made to go ahead, I strongly believe that the committee as present constituted will not be unable to communicate with the public any better than it has in the past and that it should therefore be disbanded and replaced during the information phase of the process by a more adept set of communicators, preferably who live on the island, not merely own property here. The new committee should be chaired by a professional facilitator, not an islander, who has no vested interest in the outcome.
