

Dialogue with the Land: The Gabriola Commons
(www.gabriolacommons.ca)

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The Gabriola Commons is intended to cultivate community involvement. It defines itself as a “Community Commons” with the idea that ultimately the whole community of this small island off the coast of British Columbia might identify with the Commons as 'ours': Our common space, our common wealth, our common responsibility and our common heritage. The commons will have succeeded if in 50 years time, the majority of the 4,500 people who call themselves Gabriola Islanders see the Commons as an extension of themselves. As hundreds are making it part of their daily lives right now, they are making it part of their consciousness, and possibly nurturing a culture in which people can begin to feel for the earth as a commons too. Quite a dream.

And it started as a dream, five years ago: the dream of a dying man who bequeathed money at least for a down payment on 26.5 acres of abandoned farm land to the community of Gabriola for this purpose. The genius of this lay in the location of the farm: right next to the hub of the island, where most of the stores, plus the school, library, bank and gas station are located. It also lay in the principals charged with this dream, including permaculturalist Heide Brown and economist Shelagh Huston who had embraced Elinor Ostrom's work in the early '90s. She called the initiative a Commons as a way to champion one of Dr. Ostrom's key principles, namely that those who use a resource should be the ones to create the rules which govern it. In other words, community regulation of shared resources.

The first public meeting was called in April, 2005, as soon as the land was bought. It was intended to share the news and begin posing the question, now what? I contributed a notice that was posted on the wall as people filled the hall, called “the medium is the message,” inviting people to walk the land, get their senses and their feet acquainted with its pond, its beaver meadow and forest paths, as well as its goat barn and farmhouse. A month later, the next meeting took the form of a world-cafe workshop where community members brainstormed to identify priorities for organization and action, and a call for volunteers netted a 12-person steering committee to take these forward. Biweekly meetings and research such as soil-sample analysis of the land itself led to a November Open-Space Workshop, “from Dream to Design” out of which consensus emerged around a land-use proposal, highlighting food production for local food security, while also identifying social projects like an elders' eco-village, land-rehabilitation work and a cultural centre. This gathering also saw the fruits of the initial networking among local businesses, who in turn supported the event by donating things like food and water.

A farm-management team was then set up to move forward on the food-related initiatives, including a community composting project, organizing a community-kitchen garden to furnish fresh produce for the local food bank, setting up allotment gardens for individual families in the community, plus planting an orchard and blueberry bushes. Further community meetings were held to get more input on things like “growing food on the Commons,” which since the land is zoned agricultural has been a natural priority. Now there are 10 management teams, all of them largely self-governing, and they are a major entry point for community involvement. The Saturday work bees are another popular

point of entry, with projects like laying water pipes for more allotment gardens or vole-proofing the fencing around the blueberries followed by a hearty meal of soup, bread and cheese in the farmhouse, where relationship building continues and with it, trust and a culture of commitment to the common well being nurtured there.

Paralleling this hands-on work have been the important tasks of formalizing structures and dealing with the government. The former has seen the steering committee become the non-profit Gabriola Commons Society/Foundation, plus the coordinating council for its management teams, plus tenants like People for a Healthy Community which runs the local food bank, and others interested in using the space for events and meetings. Its monthly meetings are public, and developments from this and other Commons initiatives are shared through a column in the local weekly paper, plus the website. The website showcases key documents, including the Charter setting out the guiding principles of the commons – naming the resources involved as a public trust to be preserved in perpetuity, “not favoring one generation over another,” plus the principles of ecological and social sustainability, local democracy and community service. The Gabriola Commons Foundation is a registered charity and its board deals with the government, most importantly in getting zoning permission and legitimacy for the innovative economic and social activities envisioned by the commons creators. The big breakthrough has been the regional government, called the Islands Trust, moving the provincial government (equivalent of a state government) to legislate a new zoning category called a community commons. (Defined as: land or facilities or uses that serve community needs and provide the community with agricultural, environmental, recreational and social benefits, but excludes for-profit commercial enterprises.)

Five years later, The Gabriola Commons is a pulsing part of the Gabriola Community, with over 800 Gabriolans signed up as members, 300 donors to pay off the mortgage and 160 active volunteers. As well, one of its management committees is explicitly dedicated to “sharing the commons” by, for example, cultivating more community involvement through partnerships – such as one with elementary school kids to restore the native plant species and eradicate invasive ones that threaten them; another, with the “Green Bikes Project,” involves repairing bikes on the Commons and placing them out for free community use on the Amsterdam model; and yet another, in partnership with Lulu Performing Arts, featuring seasonal sound walks through the Commons. These are walking meditations allowing people to absorb the birdsongs, frog songs, insect song, the movement of wind through trees with and without leaves on them, taking in the “sonic signature” of the place in time.

I'm glad to be on a panel about community engagement because it allows me to focus on the communication aspects of a commons. As a sometime Communications scholar in my professional life, I am aware of something called the bias of communication. One of the founders of international communication theory was a Canadian called Harold Innis, who introduced this concept as a tool for understanding the larger civilizational shifts of history, and called for a balance between the two as the best way to avoid crisis and collapse.

Innis's theory boils down to this: societies that are biased toward controlling space, militarily or through commerce, will favor fast, efficient transmission forms of communication. The relations of communication don't matter: just get the instructions through and the transaction done. On the other hand, he identified other societies as more concerned with time, which pre-modern societies often were. Here, he didn't mean linear time, the time of transactions and contract deadlines. He meant cyclical time, nature's time, the body's time. The time of being more than becoming. In his theorizing, he predicted that such societies will favor shorter-distance media that bind people together in a sense of solidarity and community. Here, relations of communication do matter, because the message isn't a to-do list or a quarterly profit statement. The message is in the trust and social bonding of enduring communities. The values of duration, continuity and conservation are critical to a time-biased civilization and its various enabling institutions like church and state, the household and the commons. The emphasis is on the earliest meanings of communication, which were about communing and

community building.

I'm not trying to diminish the commons as an economic, and even a commercial institution here, and the role of fast, digital networks to support it. I'm just emphasizing the commons' rich historical legacy going back to the Greek roots of the word economy, oikos, which means 'household,'" and going back to a time when the word for it, in old English, was "tide," the cycles of seawater washing up and back from the coastline following the rhythms of the moon. It's a legacy I think we can fruitfully draw on and build on in our commons-revival work today.

Meanwhile, getting back to communication theory. Marshall McLuhan, in turn, used Innis' theories as a jumping off point for his own, including his famous aphorism: the medium is the message. The medium you use, and the social relations involved, matter. And so, face-to-face dialogue has been an essential medium in building a sense of community among the people of the Gabriola Commons, and so has engaging the larger population and institutions like the school so that their sense of community is enhanced, and begins to include the commons too. Rituals like the sound walks and the weekly work bees plus shared meals are also vital. There's something about making soup together, sitting at a table slurping up that soup together, washing dishes together, taking the garbage out and turning over the compost heap together, and chatting about this and that in the process. As Elinor Ostrom asserts in *Governing the Commons*, trust among commons participants and a sense of community are key to robust institutions and related commitment.

Mind you, she equally emphasizes the importance of transparent enforceable rules, and effective monitoring to sustain that commitment as "credible."

That's one of the issues I want to put out on the table here: getting the balance right between rules that scare people off and foster us/them thinking and too much trust resulting in freeloading that sends the committed away in disgust. I could talk more about this later, sharing the friction and frustration that has occurred around this.

There's one other troubling issue I'd like to share too: namely, the boundary between commercial, for-profit economy and not-for profit. There's a paradox here: nature's economy is not a commercial economy, yet the commercial economy depends on and draws from it. Ditto, I'd say for the gift economy. I would argue that it's a hybrid, yet on Gabriola, the local businesses are policing the boundary for fear of unfair competition. Do others have similar problems, and, if so, how do you talk this through?