

Notes from Commons Council

September 5. 2017

Present: Deb Ferens, Judith Plant, Patsy Ludwick, Kim Kasasian, Davy Bouvier, Muriel Wiens, Patrick Roux, Jinny Hayes, George Szanto, Brenda Fowler, Kit Szanto, Dave Lightly, Bob Andrew, Judith Roux, Heather Menzies

Co-facilitators: John Peirce and Linda St.Clair

Notes: Farm Team (Note for October: Long Range Planning Team to record)

Sweeper: Kim

❖ **20 minute Discussion:** Review of Volunteer Policy Heather and Jinny (community perceptions)

Intro: (Heather began with a summary of notes from 10 in-depth conversations she had with long-time members of the Commons plus one conversation with someone outside the Commons on the Commons' Volunteer Policy.

A. Our growing pains

- Lack of agreement on paying someone to clean washrooms can be seen as symptomatic of our "growing pains". The amount of volunteer time flowing into the Commons is not keeping pace with the expansion of facilities, projects and teams on the Commons. As a result, there is a concentration of knowledge in a few hands, fostering the perception of 'insiders' who know everything. People who sit on many teams need to resist the feeling that they are responsible for everything and have all the answers. Those on the outside can begin to see the Commons as a "closed shop", leaving little room for others or freedom for improvisation. At the same time there is the classic question: how to sustain involvement and action when the initial energy burst of innovation fades?
- As a variation on our growing pains, the Commons has become very complex, not only in our decision-making process, but also in the seemingly endless process through which we engage in projects. There is a lack of understanding that much of the decision making actually takes place at the team level; the perception is that every decision is consensus-based and involves Council, (leading to frustration and delays in the face of a few nay-sayers.) We need to make the process explicit, clear and simple. We also need to find a way to report on the progress in on-going projects.
- The Commons is complex by its nature, deliberately differing from traditional non-profits through its modelling of cooperative decision-making with leadership from within and shared responsibility. We need to be able to describe this and communicate the positive feeling of coming together as a group to achieve a goal.

B. Unpacking the ideas behind "volunteerism"

A lot of people found the word itself to be problematic, associated with the modern era with non-profits & charities, not what being a commoner is about

People also used the word 'rigid' to describe our policy on volunteerism.

Not that many young people can afford to give away their time on a regular basis.

This emphasis on volunteerism lends us an aura of purist idealism.

It also sets up an implicit division between those who contribute only through financial donations and those who contribute by direct labour.

A comment captured: There is a “fetishism” of volunteer action which creates feelings of deep discomfort.

C. “Summary thoughts and suggestions”

Heather said that she held back people’s suggestions for possible changes to allow more discussion of the issue.

Discussion: (Comments captured from various teams. discussion was short, but reports were introduced where time permitted☺)

- Regret that so much time/fuss has been made over the bathroom issue and suggested that people could volunteer for certain tasks for a given period (e.g. a year). Deep cleaning is a different subject and needs to be done.
- The Progress Team examined Commons demographics on the “volunteer” issue and recognized that many were older, retired people with time available and pension income. The question: “What’s the problem with cleaning a bathroom?” Why avoid helping people in the community who need money?
--PMT suggested that those who are benefitting from the Commons should take part in caring for it. It’s important to avoid becoming a service organization. “We are all responsible”
- Trustees and Finance Teams) How do we honour donor-directed funding and still follow principles of stewardship, taking responsibility over the short and long term? It is important also to know the ramifications of hiring people (contractual regulations, payroll, WCB, deductions etc.) How to be fiscally responsible?
- We have a great example in the stewarding of the Community Kitchen – an amazing mix of people from “business” and other backgrounds making the volunteerism work.
- Why do we not help people who need money? Are we a commune or a Commons? A Commons should be socially responsible. We seem to be allergic to money.
- We are becoming rigid, sticking to purist principles. People should come because they feel ownership.
- Communication Team - Perhaps we don’t need a volunteer policy. The Commons, like any other non-profit society, balances volunteer and paid work. There is no reason given to back our policy of “pure volunteerism”. Time ran out for discussion but the following comments were recorded from other submitted team reports:
(SCT) Range of opinions from respect for the existing policy (of no paid labour) with seasonal deep cleaning in workbees to support for hiring a regular cleaner, recognizing that this is in contradiction to the existing policy.
- (LRP team) The policy on volunteerism is clear. How do we feel about allowing a donor to designate use of the funds? Suggestions: invest monthly stipend on good cleaning/maintenance tools and hiring where expertise is required. Ensure that those using the space get the strong message to sweep up after use. Do we need a damage deposit? General support for the idea of a quarterly deep cleaning, perhaps having a contract with a cleaning org. to take this on.
- (Farm Team): We have an “embarrassment of riches” in skilled people willing to volunteer. We should ask people to take part, before assuming that payment is necessary.

❖ **TOOL LIBRARY** (Patsy and Kim)

Patsy: The intention of the FIXIT Fair and the Tool Library (to benefit the community and bring people together) seems to fit well with the Commons. Those involved in the Tool Library would like confirmation that this understanding is reciprocal with the Commons.

Discussions with the Finance Team have suggested that incorporating as a society or cooperative may be the best way for the Tool Library to exist as a separate entity on the Commons, with a Memorandum of Understanding describing the nature of the relationship. There is clearly community support and willingness to create a membership.

What is needed from the Commons is agreement on a location which satisfies the Tool Library's need for easy access by car, possibility of electricity and Wifi (or eventually Ethernet), and shared concern for aesthetics. A plan was circulated showing a preferred location near the south west corner of the hedge (i.e. near the central parking area. Kim showed a sketch of a movable 100 sq.ft. shed with a welcoming porch, and described it as a "people place", a hub, which would be open 6 to 8 hours per week. The Tool Library would assume the costs of construction of the shed and are exploring solar energy with battery backup. Questions concerning issues such as security, funding etc. were discussed.

It was agreed by consensus that the Tool Library would be a "great fit" with the Commons and should be encouraged to go forward. The next stage consists of working with the Trustees to write up an MoU, then working with the PMT and Infrastructure teams on siting and design. There was a request that those involved in the Tool Library come to Council regularly to share information and hear others' stories.

❖ STORAGE

Similar questions concerning storage for the Lions have been examined over the past months with the following understanding:

Location: the preferred site is that marked by an E on the Storage Options Plan: i.e. in the north west corner of the west parking lot – well screened by existing vegetation and easily accessed by car. There was agreement that the storage could be within a trucked-in container, providing it is aesthetically treated. This also would be movable (on concrete piers), with all costs borne by the Lions.

Questions: would this require an MoU? Probably. It was agreed that rent should not be charged since the Lions offer a major benefit to the community (and the Commons) in a way similar to Poetry Gabriola. .

For either the Tool Library or the Lions' storage any need for power would need to be assessed and potentially charged.

The Sharing the Commons Team will formally take these decisions back to the Lions as well as the Tool Library and initiate the siting discussion with the PMT and Infrastructure Teams . The two projects will be on the agenda of the next meeting of the Trustees.

❖ SMOKING ON THE COMMONS

Linda presented the main questions asked of the teams:

1. Is the "Extreme risk of fire" period the only time all smoking will be banned on the Commons?
2. At other times is it enough to respect the distances established by public buildings: i.e. 3 metres (some quoted 6) from any doorway or window.

Discussion (from individuals as well as teams):

- What is our guiding principle: " Everything not expressly prohibited is permitted." or "Everything not expressly permitted is prohibited." He would advocate for the first, with reasonable accommodation to allow people to smoke at a safe distance from flammable materials or doorways.

- Many agreed with a compassionate response, understanding the role of smoking in helping people deal with serious problems, but requiring that a safe area be designated for smokers.
- Several teams proposed that an area be designated at least 30 feet from any building to be maintained by those using the area as the *legal distance required for all public buildings*.
- There was agreement that enforcing a “no-smoking on the Commons” policy would be *difficult* considering the size of the property and number of people walking through. *There was consensus that during FIRE HAZARD season as designated by the Gabriola Fire Department the Commons would post those signs and expect those using the Commons to respect that designation.*
- Two areas were finally determined as acceptable for smokers during non-FIRE HAZARD season: the cob wall bench and the concrete slab underneath the upper deck of the house, with distances from windows and doors marked out. *More exploration may be needed and discussed with those smokers who attend PHC lunches.*

❖ **Maintaining the house**

Returning to the issue which had given rise to the discussion of volunteer/paid labour:

- Can we form a group which would take care of the house (cleanliness, shabbiness etc. – e.g. strip away wallpaper, paint, buy vacuum cleaner...)
- A short-term answer could be to create a “Farm house” Stewards Team.
- What is the fuss about? The house is always pretty clean. A simple sweeping would take care of tracked in dirt.
- We’re obliged to do what Heide has asked for or give the money back.
- We seem to be allergic to spending money on wages. A worker is worthy of his hire.
- This isn’t about degrading people.
- A short-term solution might be to pay the PHC housekeeper who comes twice a week to clean the PHC space a little more to extend her territory.
- Let’s review what we really need. In the earlier days, we did pay someone (as “kitchen diva”) to keep the house clean. It turned out not to be worth the travel time to get to the Commons and do a bit of work for too little money.
- Perhaps a contract would work. (Someone on payroll would cost us more in time and deductions etc.) We need to make a good decision now and do it right.
- Maintenance of the house is a larger issue than just cleaning. It would cost more than we could afford to pay to cover the time spent in upkeep, repairs, the repetitive tasks (such as collecting samples for water testing). We agree that it is fine for this to be done by volunteers. Why single out cleaning
- The idea of house stewards (like the volunteer community kitchen stewards) is an interesting one to consider. Let’s do some brainstorming to go further with it. *Deb Ferens, John Peirce and Linda St.Clair agreed to meet before the next Council meeting in October.*

- ❖ **Team reports** There was little time for teams to report on anything but the three subjects under discussion. All teams are requested to send their reports to Linda St.Clair (linst01@gmail.com) to complete the September Council Notes.

Next Council: Tuesday October 3 at 7 pm (Recording Team: Long Range Planning)