

Official Recognition in BC of a “Commons” – Jan 27, 2011

Something amazing has just happened! The concept of a "commons" has just been formally signed into law in British Columbia.

With the passage of Bylaw No. 258 by our Local Trust Committee, a new category of land use was added to the Gabriola Official Community Plan (OCP), giving the definition of a "community commons" 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.”

This definition reaffirms our vision of the Gabriola Commons: managed by a community for the benefit of community members, on land which belongs to a non-profit society existing solely to hold it in trust for that community. (Technically the Land Act cannot recognize a community as legal owner; however, in the covenant that is currently being drafted, we propose a definition of the community as "beneficial owner".)

Specifically added to the Gabriola OCP is a description of the agricultural and institutional principal uses supported on the Commons.

"The institutional uses permitted will include non-profit and not for profit enterprises that provide services of benefit to the residents of Gabriola Island. Educational uses also fall under the definition of "institutional" and it is intended that the Commons will be a place for learning about agriculture, food production and sustainability practices."

Based on this first Bylaw the Local Trust Committee adopted Bylaw 259, creating a new zone: the Gabriola Commons (GC) Comprehensive Development Zone and defining the principal and accessory uses permitted (including such accessory uses as public assembly, food depot, office and storage and "commons accessory commercial".)

With these bylaws we have established an exciting precedent. As Gabriola Commons Foundation co-chair Bob Andrew said, "We've created a 'Commons' use in a community plan! There are other places in the Gulf Islands and throughout BC that are looking at that."

Making historic change isn't something many of us get to do, but several years of wrestling the vision into regulatory language with our dedicated Islands Trust planners and Trustees have finally permitted this to happen. We Gabriolans can be proud of our one small step toward a new notion – a legal, de facto affirmation of the value of the “commons.”