

ECONEWS

Issue #200

Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

MARCH 2010

OUR ISLAND'S FUTURE

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'Til it's gone
They logged paradise
And put up a housing lot.*

We've got a huge land-use crisis on our hands on Vancouver Island, and an associated problem concerning the way we elect the people who make the decisions about the future of our Island.

At 32,000 square kilometres (3.1 million hectares), Vancouver Island is larger than self-governing nations such as Israel, Slovenia and Lebanon, and three quarters the size of Switzerland.

When it comes to governance, however, most of our Island has no municipal governance. Each non-incorporated area is represented by one Electoral Area Director, who is sometimes responsible for a vast area of land. Land-use decisions in these areas are made by these directors, or by their non-elected alternates.

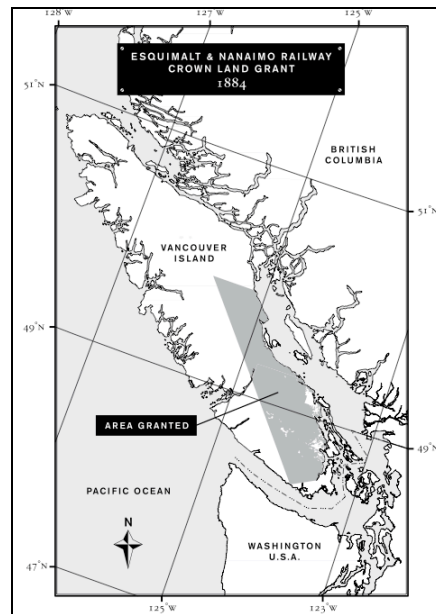
As long as most of the Island was in active forestry, this was a manageable system. Now that forest companies are re-inventing themselves as real estate developers, however, seeking zoning decisions for new subdivisions, this primitive form of democracy is a huge problem, especially since regional directors sometimes vote on a mutual back-scratching basis.

The immediate crisis has arisen because in 2007 BC's Forests Minister Rich Coleman lost leave of his senses, and allowed Western Forest Products (WFP) to remove 28,000 acres of forestland from its Tree Farm License, granting it a multi-million hand-out with no community consultation and no requirement for parkland protection.

WFP has now parceled the land up, and is putting 5,200 acres of waterfront land between Jordan River and Port Renfrew on the market on March 8th, under zoning rules that give minimal protection. The Land Conservancy is

scrambling to save what it can, especially around the Sooke Potholes, Sandcut Beach, and Jordan River.

Others - including Mike Hicks, the Electoral Area Director, and Keith Martin, MP, are scrambling to get all levels of government together to buy the bulk of the WFP lands. There is a critical public meeting on the crisis at 7pm on Wed March 3rd at the SJ Willis Auditorium, 923 Topaz Ave (250-370-9930 Ext 26).



The shaded area shows the extent of the 1883 E&N Rail Crown land grant

WFP is owned by Brookfield Asset Management, a conglomerate that also owns half of Island Timberlands, which owns 258,000 hectares of Vancouver Island, mostly in the Courtenay, Port Alberni, Nanaimo and Duncan regions. In 2009, another timber company, TimberWest, put 54,000 hectares on the market. For a map of WFP's BC land holdings, see <http://bit.ly/wfplands>.

It is our colonial history that has set us up for this. Back in 1884, Canada's government gave Robert Dunsmuir, the coal baron and Nanaimo MLA, a

contract to construct the Esquimalt and Nanaimo railway, plus \$750,000, plus 2,000,000 acres covering the eastern half of the Island from Finlayson Arm to Seymour narrows (see map), plus the rights to all the coal and all the timber. The Dunsmuirs soon sold the land, making \$11 million in 1910 dollars from the coal-mining rights alone.

That is all history, but it's we who have to live with the consequences - we and the Coast Salish First Nations, who consider the E&N Rail grant "an egregious act of piracy" that is really upsetting their treaty negotiations.

The associated problem - how we are governed - is equally important, and right now is a critical time, since the BC government has just established a Local Government Elections Task Force to review specific issues relating to local government elections. We have until April 15th to send written comments - for the details, see www.localelectionstaskforce.gov.bc.ca.

Right now, a real estate developer can donate as much as he wants to help sympathetic candidates get elected - and it happens all the time. A healthy local democracy might, among other things:

- * Require 100 local signatures for a candidate to stand (500 for Mayor);
- * Ban corporate and union donations
- * Limit individual campaign donations to \$100;
- * Set spending limits for candidates;
- * Allow municipalities to adopt a single transferable voting system;
- * Reduce the voting age to 16 years;
- * Require all regional directors to vote on non-incorporated lands.

A healthy non-corruptible democracy is our only hope of salvaging the mess left by the E&N land grant. Combined with proper zoning to govern the Island's future land-use, based firmly on the principles of sustainability, all could yet be well.

Guy Dauncey