

Exploring a New Model of Community Management

For every organization, institution, or community, it is prudent to periodically review and, if appropriate, revise the management model.

On Thetis, our “management” is delivered by a variety of organizations: the Local Trust Committee of the Islands Trust, the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD), the Ministry of Transportation (via Mainroad Contracting), the Thetis Island Improvement District (TIID) and Volunteer Fire Department (TIVFD), the Thetis Island Ratepayers’ and Residents’ Association (TIRRA), the Thetis Island Community Association (TICA), the Thetis Island Port Commission (TIPC), the St. Margaret’s Cemetery Board, and the Thetis Island Parents’ Association (TIPA).

As the directors of the boards of TIRRA, TICA and the Improvement District well understand, the current “management model” is becoming difficult to sustain. Some of the challenges are:

- ❑ Changing demographics, such that it is challenging to find volunteers to operate the local volunteer-run organizations and associated services, particularly the on-going administrative chores.
- ❑ Confusion by some residents and property owners not involved in any of the organizations as to which organization does what jobs and why.
- ❑ Rising assessments and taxation with little local control on taxation rates.
- ❑ Lack of local control for administrative decisions by governments that have little understanding of the local community.
- ❑ Rising and redundant insurance coverage costs, financial audit requirements and costs, and other overhead requirements among the various organizations.
- ❑ Difficulty for some local service providers to fairly raise operating funds to support the services provided, with the exception of TIPC and TIID, which have budgets derived from property taxation.

With these considerations in mind, TIRRA is consulting with other key service boards on Thetis to determine whether there is general support for examining the option of incorporation as an “island municipality”. The Province provides funding for a professional study of the pros and cons of a community taking the incorporation step. If there is support among the various management boards, TIRRA proposes to approach the Province to request that it initiate such a non-binding study.

Here is a capsule comparison of the “management” models available to Thetis. Incorporation is the 5th model in this list.

Model 1: Status Quo

The status quo – the current array of boards and organizations – requires considerable effort by willing volunteers to staff the boards and maintain operations. Due to different legal mandates and responsibilities, these organizations cannot be combined under their present charters. This multi-board “model” has evolved over the decades to respond to community needs, but could this model now be too cumbersome to sustain?

Key “Status Quo” Issues:

1. There is a perennial shortage of or difficulty locating volunteers to fill the various boards. Together, TIRRA, TICA, TIID, and TIPC require about 20 board members, with an additional 10-15 associated volunteer positions to be filled for administrative purposes. These numbers do not include the Fire Department which requires 20 committed volunteers to train, maintain the halls and equipment, and provide fire and first responder emergency services.
2. TIRRA and TICA have traditionally raised the majority of their funds through the voluntary contributions of their members. Most members of the community pay, but the number that do not pay is significant and every year volunteers must expend extraordinary efforts to remind people or urge people to pay their “community service fees and dues”.
3. TIRRA, TICA and TIID each carry separate insurance coverages (property, liability and D & O). Meanwhile TIPC has substantial insurance coverage obtained at a highly preferential rate through the CVRD linkage to the Municipal Finance Authority.
4. TIRRA, TICA and TIID each require appropriately skilled volunteers to conduct administrative duties (financial management and general management). Few people wish to volunteer for such on-going tasks that require continuous vigilance throughout each year.
5. We have difficulty as an unorganized rural community convincing government agencies or levels of government to provide or continue services. For example, on several occasions BC Ambulance Service has been asked to fund an ambulance station here and they have declined. Road maintenance and subdivision issues are decided by public servants elsewhere. Our ability to support the School District’s continuance of Thetis Island School is limited by being perceived as an unorganized rural area.

6. Under the Taxation (Rural Areas) Act we have no control on mil rates for provincially set service fees. These are set as an average for all rural areas in the province and, if you happen to be in an area of high or rapidly rising assessments, local support for these services will be far greater than the benefits received.

Model 2: Combine Two or More Community Organizations

Suggestions are occasionally made that TIRRA and TICA should be combined or that the Improvement District (TIID) should take on an expanded role. This is not legally possible. Even if it was possible, it would not likely to solve the issues.

The facts are:

- TIRRA is a non-charity society that provides services and is an advocate to government for the community. It cannot be a charitable society as is TICA.
- TICA is a charitable society that is responsible for funding and operating the community hall. It cannot provide other services or act as a community advocate.
- TIID is limited by provincial mandate to operating (funding and providing a legal framework) the fire department. The Province, when asked, has refused altering or expanding its mandate.
- Even if feasible, while combining any or all of these organizations would reduce the number of board directors/officers, such a merger would increase the management burden on the residual directors/officers, thereby necessitating a move to paid, professional management staff but without the ability to raise funds consistently and fairly.

Model 3: Strengthen Reliance on the CVRD

While the Islands Trust function and responsibilities would remain as they are, certain local services and assets could be turned over to the CVRD or the CVRD could provide tax-based funding for community organizations to operate these services. Such services/assets include: cemetery ownership, trail ownership, Forbes Hall ownership, Fire Department ownership and operation.

Key considerations include:

1. The CVRD Board and/or the CVRD administration are interested in uniform management policies across the region, rather than policies tailored to a specific community such as Thetis.
2. The CVRD could develop tax-based funding bylaws to support Forbes Hall. It was asked to do so in the past but, instead of a uniform parcel tax, it developed an assessment-based tax. Without consultation and ignoring community advice, it determined that this tax-based funding should be assessment based. The initiative was, as a result, declined by TICA.
3. The CVRD is legally the provider of garbage and recycling services to the region, however it has consistently avoided extending service to Thetis.
4. Thetis Island is represented on the CVRD Board by one director out of eight. That director has a greater geographical interest than Thetis Island. Our voice is and will remain weak with the CVRD.
5. The CVRD Board tends to meet in evenings in Duncan, making it difficult and time-consuming for Thetis Island representatives to make presentations.
6. There would likely be local resistance to transfer of local assets (cemetery, trail, community hall, and fire hall) to control by the CVRD Board, partly for historical reasons and partly for the reasons given above.

Model 4: Expanded Islands Trust Governance Powers

The Provincial Government has been repeatedly asked by the Islands Trust to enhance the governance authority of the Trust. The Islands Trust is interested increased regulatory authority, such as with regard to environmental and forest management. There does not seem to be Islands Trust interest in operating local residential services such as garbage, recycling, fire department, first responders, and so forth. Therefore, this model does not appear to solve the challenges of local services management on Thetis Island.

Model 5: Incorporation as an “Island Municipality”

Thetis Island could incorporate as an “Island Municipality” within the domain of the Islands Trust. Incorporation would enable all local services to be provided through the management of a single elected board (i.e. a council) with support from a few paid part time, or contract staff (administrator/treasurer, clerk, facilities manager, fire chief) who would provide the day-to-day core service functions. The rural character of Thetis would remain, as now. There would still be a reliance on goodwill and volunteers to carry the many non-mundane tasks. This model is the only option that solves the current management problems outlined

at the commencement of this paper. The following bullets summarize the key elements of this option:

- ❑ Thetis Island would remain within the Islands Trust jurisdiction and the Islands Trust Act would apply. It would be up to the community as to whether local taxpayers continued to contribute the planning portion of its Islands Trust funding.
- ❑ One board – the Municipal Council – would replace three, maybe four current boards. Anything to do with holding and managing assets and services would be transferred to the Municipality. TIRRA may continue as an advocacy body but its insurance needs would be minimal. The T.I. Community Fund would continue as the charitable organization.
- ❑ The financial and other administrative functions of TICA, TIRRA and the TIID could be combined under a single paid part time contractor or two paid part time contractors. These would still not be full time jobs.
- ❑ The Municipality could assume responsibility for local zoning (as long as it complied with the IT Act) and compliance issues, such that local issues were locally managed.
- ❑ A small municipal hall would be needed, likely on the grounds of the community hall. If necessary, the clerk at this hall could have various duties, as might be needed by the community.
- ❑ Local public roads would be converted to municipal ownership after a 5 year period in which any needed works are completed. Currently road maintenance is funded by local taxes and a contractor provides the services. This would continue with municipal ownership, but priorities would be locally decided.
- ❑ The municipality could assume responsibility for local permits and compliance issues, or these could be left with the CVRD. If transferred such services could be performed under contract by a qualified company.
- ❑ The municipality could take advantage of preferential insurance coverage and borrowing rates through the Municipal Finance Authority.
- ❑ Subdivision approval would become a municipal function, rather than one administered by the Ministry of Transportation.
- ❑ The municipality could set its own multiples between property class taxes, whereas these (i.e. commercial, farm, residential) are now set provincially.

- CVRD services provided solely to the community (e.g. the dock, funding support for Forbes Hall, if any) would become municipal services under local control.
- Policing would continue as now: through the provincial RCMP detachment in Ladysmith.
- Some provincial grants are available for municipalities, particularly for smaller municipalities.
- The federal government provides municipalities with funding from the federal gasoline taxes.
- The total tax base of Thetis is roughly \$140 million, many times larger than small municipalities already functioning elsewhere in British Columbia. The year-round population of Thetis is larger than the smallest municipalities in the Province, and the summer population of residents is much greater.