

joining hands across the waters ...

## **Gulf Islands Alliance**

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### **Working paper in support of strengthening the Trust Policy Statement May 2012**

1. The Trust Policy Statement, as the chief instrument of the Islands Trust Act to preserve and protect the Trust Area as a special place, must be strengthened to provide Trust Council with the sufficient authority to carry out its mandate. GIA regards the Trust Policy Statement as the heartbeat of Trust land-use governance. The Policy Statement introduction states "sustainability of the region's physical environment, native species and quality of life are threatened by low-density urban sprawl and rapid population growth." GIA believes that lack of policy clarity will contribute unnecessarily to local conflicts over land use proposals and open the door to excessive development and environmental damage. Removing governance ambiguity advances democracy, fairness, community understanding and harmony.

2. One interpretation of the recent vote to set aside the Trust Policy Statement Task Force's recommendation to launch a comprehensive Trust Policy Statement review is that the new Trust Council wasn't ready to fully embrace the commanding role the Trust Policy Statement must take in guiding the decisions and work of Trust Council and staff. The Act says the Trust Policy Statement "must be a general statement of the policies of the Trust Council to carry out the object of the Trust".

3. In 1994 the Trust adopted an official mechanism to review the Trust Policy Statement. It includes an annual report from its programs committee that must include an inventory of selected review topics. The process for amending the policy statement, approved in 1995, involves inviting comment on the proposed changes from municipalities, regional districts, other government agencies and the public in the Trust area. The province must then approve changes. In describing the Policy Statement as an 'evolving document' the Trust promises that it "will be subject to periodic reviews and revision and will be sensitive and responsive to changing conditions and strategies to support the object of the Islands Trust." No significant changes have been made in the last decade despite a dramatic rise in public awareness of environmental health and sustainability issues.

4. When Gas Tax funds from the Union of BC Municipalities were made available for the proposed review of the policy statement, they were rejected by Trust Council. The money carried a cost that some people inside and outside the Trust couldn't accept -- the adoption of an 'integrated community sustainability planning' model for the Trust area. This model was 'remarkably similar' to the 'growth strategy' of many BC municipalities. That this was suggested to Trust Council as a valid source of conditional funding is an example of actions that appear to favour growth for the islands. What some island constituents may perceive as a growth bias of the trust bureaucracy can be tempered by strengthening the Trust Policy Statement.

5. Key to the needed review is to better define 'preserve' and 'protect'. The human impulse to accelerate the growth rate is at odds with the environmental objective of the Trust Act. Identifying excessive growth as problematic for the future of the natural world has become a mainstream concern in recent years. GIA is urging Council to make sure the Trust Area remains an envied model of responsible environmental behaviour. It helps if Council continues to regard its duty and jurisdiction as matters of trust, not politics. This 'duty of care' policy, to preserve and protect the natural environment of the Trust area, is implicit in the Trust Policy Statement. It needs to be explicit.

6. GIA believes Islands Trust should devote more of its resources to promoting -- to its own trustees, staff, islands property owners and residents, and the province -- the Trust Area as a special environmental area, distinct from the business-as-usual local governments that surround it. GIA is confident most islanders embrace the values of this special place and island life and will support strengthening policies to protect it.

7. The existing Trust Policy Statement is complicated and easy to misinterpret or ignore. Key words such as 'environment' and 'amenities' are not defined. Further, it does not set out the responsibilities of trust planners to local trust committees. Because the Trust Act was established to serve residents of the Trust Area and everyone else in the province, the review process should involve consultation with representatives from both groups. Provision should also be made for the underlying ecological foundation to be strongly reflected in the review.

8. An improved Trust Policy Statement will show more clearly how the powers of the Islands Trust -a confederation of all local trust areas - relate to federated powers of each local trust area. The Trust Act insists that local land use planning must conform to the Act and Trust Policy Statement, but the statement allows local trust areas to opt out if they find reasons to do so. GIA believes that focusing on a common goal for the islands is fundamental to their sustainability and should be achieved without any significant loss of local autonomy and rural community character. A more clearly described governance model will increase pride and participation in caring for these beautiful islands. The existing disconnect between some local issues and overarching trust values exposes the islands to erosion of the Trust's preserve and protect mandate, a circumstance harder to identify and counter in the absence of a visible, strong policy statement.