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Denman Islanders make a “socially irresponsible” impression on “the outside world”

by Graham Brazier

“Denman is a pleasant, but at first glance, unimpressive island. Its charm and scenic delights are mostly concealed. Probably thousands have driven across it on their way to its more prepossessing neighbour, Hornby without giving it a second look. But times are changing and what Denman has to offer is of increasing interest to the outside world.” Those forthright, yet rather poetic words appeared in a government document — one that, if you live on Denman Island is from the “outside world”. It was 1971 when the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona released its 60 page “Denman Island Planning Study” which included those succinct observations. At the time, Denman Island’s population was 250.

The “changing times” referred to were the result of the fact that the benefits of logging were gradually shifting to off-island interests and the commitment to agriculture was in decline due to increasing land prices. These factors seemed to suggest that perhaps small scale tourism might be able to fill at least some of the economic gap. To aid in the study of Denman Island’s future, the regional district, assisted by the Ratepayers Association, held a number of well-attended meetings at the Community Hall. Having listened to the community, the regional district concluded: “There is widespread opposition on Denman to more parks and recreation facilities which might attract more tourists or more subdivisions. Tourists are seen as causing inconvenience with the ferry service, disturbing the peace of the residents and as contributing little or nothing to the welfare of the island.” The regional district then went on to chastise Denman Island residents for holding such views with the words: “a policy of discouraging tourists and prohibiting subdivision becomes socially irresponsible and politically unacceptable after a certain point.”

Nevertheless, after hearing the community’s opposition to more parks and recreation facilities the regional district pressed on, though it admitted to “a scaling down of the report proposals” particularly with respect to parks. A few of the eight recommendations of the report respecting parks and recreation included the concentration of intensive tourist recreation facilities including campsites at Fillongley Provincial Park and the acquisition of additional land to the north of the park to meet long-term needs. It was also suggested that the province investigate the establishment of small beach/picnic area at Henry Bay/Longbeak Point and, further, that the Regional District, in conjunction with the community, establish a small park of about 5 acres at Denman Point. The final recommendation involved the government wharf, which, it suggested should be improved in order to handle increasing pleasure boat traffic and, further, that commercial marina services should be permitted. While it seems that the governing body from the “outside world” listened to the community, it’s not at all clear that it heard the community.

Fast forward seven years, to 1978 and we learn that another branch of government from “the outside world” has appeared to learn from the experience of the Regional District. In March officials from the Parks Branch of the provincial government met with the ratepayers Parks Committee and revealed a tentative plan for Fillongley Park. They then assured the committee that the community would be kept informed as the plan developed. Then in August the Parks Branch, without the knowledge of Denman Island’s Ratepayers sent a crew with heavy

equipment to do, what the foreman described as “maintenance” work at Fillongley Park. Upon inspection by several members of the ratepayers Parks Committee it was discovered that this involved removal of the foundations of the Beadnell home, ploughing under of bulbs and flowers, removal of various shrubs and trees and cutting a fifty foot wide swarth from the old homesite to the creek. This was widely, and, as it turned out, correctly, interpreted as a precursor to a major development planned by the Parks Branch. A commitment to keep the community informed was repeated at a September meeting with local Trustees. Kel Kelly, however, was not convinced. In September’s edition of the “Rag and Bone” he wrote: “For those of us who loved the Beadnell Place “for what it was we say to the Parks Branch, thanks for tearing up a special place in our hearts, thanks for your deceit and dishonesty, and thanks for showing us that we shouldn’t be so damn trusting and slow to react when Phase II begins without notice.” Another three months passed while Kel’s remarks were digested.

It was January of 1979 when the detailed plans for Fillongley Park were finally revealed at a community meeting. The plan, from the “outside world” involved 53 campsites, 87 picnic tables and parking to accommodate 100 cars. Not much digesting was required for that information and so it was in March that the “Rag & Bone” reported that an “audible sigh” accompanied the result of a vote by “a large segment of the community” to reject the proposed extension of camping facilities at Fillongley Park.”

And it appeared that the “outside world” got the message: for the expansion of Fillongley Park was abandoned and in April 1985 Ratepayers received a letter from the Parks Branch that assured them that there were no plans to “upgrade” Fillongley Park and a 1987 report by the Ministry of Environment and Parks concluded “the natural qualities of water bodies in [Fillongley] park will be maintained, without incurring adverse impacts from park development, management or use.”

Socially irresponsible?

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