

The Saga of Gospel Rock

Gospel Rock stirs passion in the hearts of people who know it. A promontory overlooking the southern Strait of Georgia, in the public consciousness Gospel Rock comprises the Rock itself as well as the waterfront cliffs and the plateau above. Whether from the Rock or Little Africa, sweeping views towards the Gulf Islands and the San Juans are the best that can be had. Gospel Rock and the surrounding uplands have been used as an informal public park for nearly a century, so it is not surprising that some members of the public mistakenly think large areas of Gospel Rock are dedicated parks, though the lands are privately held. The 138 acres of the Gospel Rock area comprise 14 legal parcels, held by 11 property owners, some reluctant to be included in the planning area.

The Town's 1988 OCP said "high priority must be given to obtaining as much of the Gospel Rock waterfront as possible, in addition to an area of parkland at the peak of the promontory which could serve as the site of an eventual look-out". In 1993, two properties in the Gospel Rock area were the subjects of a rezoning application to develop 300 housing units. Opposition from the public concerning access to the area and development within environmentally sensitive areas led to the withdrawal of the application. This public sentiment informed the exercise that produced the Town's new OCP in 2005, which designated the Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Plan (GRNP) area.

In November 2005, the Town awarded a \$149,902 contract to Holland Barrs to develop a "unique and inclusive neighbourhood plan process" for Gospel Rock. The process was to be concluded by September 2006 and it was understood that the property owners would cover the consultants' fees. Early in 2006 Holland Barrs went to work with a Council-appointed Select Committee comprised of Councillor Johnson, two former elected people, two representatives of the Friends of Gospel Rock, two representatives of the property owners, and a small number of community members.

The next thirty months, half a dozen public sessions, multiple environmental studies and several drafts produced two planning options – one with waterfront development (A) and one without (B). In June 2008, Mayor Janyk invited Gibsons residents, property owners and business owners to respond to a survey which asked "Which option do you prefer, A or B". 525 people responded, 74% from the Town, 16% from Area E and 10% from elsewhere. 59.4% favoured option B.

The Select Committee made its recommendation for option B to Council on October 21, 2008. The recommendation was not unanimous – the property owner representatives favoured option A. Council deferred. On November 4th, with the gallery full of Friends of Gospel Rock (but with no representatives of the property owners, who had received no notice, it was later revealed), Mayor Janyk added the Gospel Rock issue to the agenda as a late item. Over the objections of Councillors Koopmans and Tretick, option B was approved. Eleven days later Mayor Janyk was re-elected by a margin of 34 votes.

In January of 2009, CAO Paul Gipps presented a report on the Gospel Rock planning process. He had obtained legal advice that suggested that the Town could be subject to a procedural fairness challenge as a result of events on November 4th. His recommendation that Council's resolution choosing option B be rescinded was approved. By May the Gospel Rock Refinement Working Committee (GRRWC) was established, comprised of Mayor Janyk in the Chair, Councillors Curry and Koopmans, the Town Planner, consulting planner Michael Rosen and property owners' representative Art Phillips. The Committee was given terms of reference in June and went to work.

In October, Councillor Koopmans resigned to take a position in Campbell River, and he was not replaced, Mayor Janyk alleging there would not be enough time to get a new committee member up to speed, leaving Council representation at two. In May, 2010 Mayor Janyk suggested a "hybrid" option that allowed a small amount of waterfront development, and this was presented at a public information meeting on June 28th. The response was not good; Mayor Janyk then suggested the Town buy the Gospel Rock waterfront to create a conservation area administered by a third party. Taxpayers resisted.

In December, when Michael Rosen presented GRRWC's latest version of the plan to Council, the Friends of Gospel Rock submitted a report claiming that the draft plan contravened the OCP on 25 points. Council directed staff to draft a Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Plan and provided some policy direction. The schedule to have a plan complete and incorporated into the OCP was now estimated to stretch to June 2011.

On April 6th, 2011, a public information meeting was held in the Elphinstone SS gym. About 300 people attended, most of them opposed to the plan. It was not a pleasant session. At the subsequent Council meeting, Mayor Janyk proposed that the issue be put to the people of Gibsons in a non-binding plebiscite to be held concurrently with elections in the fall. This was an unpopular idea. In May a property owner wrote to the Town saying, "We have lost faith in the process ... and will proceed with development under existing zoning", and submitted a subdivision application.

In July it became clear that the property owners were no longer willing to cover the consultant costs to move the plan forward. The Town now admits that it faces \$57,000 in unbudgeted costs, and that there is no written agreement with the property owners. This week, Council has voted to deal with the seven outstanding issues that must be resolved to complete the GRNP. There may be enough time to get the enabling OCP amendment to first reading before the elections in November. It will be the job of the new Council to hold the required Public Hearing and complete the legislative process.

22 September, 2011

A resident of Gibsons, Hammy McClymont has attended and reported on nearly all meetings of Gibsons Council since December, 2008.

Update

November 1, 2011

Gibsons Council worked at finishing up the outstanding issues on the Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Plan at two meetings; Committee of the Whole on October 12th and its regular Council Meeting on November 1st. Council managed to resolve the outstanding issues, however two obstacles emerged. The draft plan had been referred to a number of agencies for their comment, among them the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MOTI) and the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC), both of whose approval of the plan will be required. Initial responses from the Ministry and the Commission were unfavourable, so Council has directed staff to meet with them to clarify reasons why the plan has been drafted the way it has. Until the approval of MOTI and the ALC is obtained, the Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Plan is stuck.

November 15, 2011, Council Meeting

The Mayor gave the following Notice of Motion:

That staff be directed to invoice all outstanding Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Plan consulting fees to the appropriate property owners and that the Plan not be adopted until the matter is adequately resolved.

CAO Waycheshen explained that this motion will be on the new Council's agenda, probably at the first meeting after the inaugural meeting on December 6th, and that the new Council will be able to receive it, act on it or let it die. Sean Eckford asked what would happen if the proposer of the motion is no longer on Council. Waycheshen confirmed that the election itself does not cause the motion to die, it must be on the new Council's agenda.

December 20, 2011, Committee of the Whole

Regarding the former mayor's notice of motion November 15th, Mayor Rowe noted that new Councillors should be aware of all information regarding this issue, including information held in camera during the term of the previous Council, and suggested that Council not proceed with this notice of motion at this time. Councillor Bauman agreed that new Councillors need to be equally informed. Mayor Rowe added that the motion may be brought forward by any member of Council at any time.

That's where the matter of the Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Plan rests as of January 30, 2012.