

Tofino Ratepayers Association Newsletter



February 21, 2021

Dear Members,

As some of you may be aware, on the Feb 23 regular council meeting, the DOT will be considering a bylaw to increase water rates by 13% to come into effect on April 1 of this year. In addition, a further 1% will be levied as an “ecosystem service fee” and given to the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation for unspecified activities by their Tribal Parks Alliance. The latter appears to be a fairly well-organized branch of the TFN who purport to provide various services through a “guardian program”. The nature of the services are mostly aspirational. Those actually in effect are generally piggy-backed on to the activities initiated and funded by other groups (Central West Coast Forest Society, Surfrider Foundation and Clayoquot Cleanup). Funding for the “Guardians” seems to come almost entirely from the contribution of “Allies” who give 1% of their gross revenues to the cause. (www.tribalparkalliance.com)

Some people are a little uncomfortable with DOT participating in this. The actual deliverables by the TPA are not clear. An accounting process does not even appear to have been discussed with the DOT as it would be with any other group seeking a District grant. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, by engaging in this program the DOT is essentially endorsing a land use proposal that has been imposed by TFN without any consultation with their neighbours. This is really the antithesis of what treaty negotiations are about. Our uncritical acquiescence to this approach actually undermines the existing treaty process that would otherwise require TFN to discuss and negotiate their future land claims with all stakeholders. Treaty issues need to be negotiated through Federal and Provincial governments. This would help ensure an equitable and supportable outcome for all. Why bother to negotiate when you can simply impose and have neighbours comply? While their website is full of lofty language and imaginative claims about the history of First Nation stewardship, at its core is a call to adopt an ill-defined management scheme that seeks to fund itself by leaning on guests and neighbours in the Tofino area. Even more concerning is that by linking fees to water utilization the DOT is tacitly agreeing to a water access fee which is clearly at odds with current provincial law. Control of all freshwater rights is by law in the hands of the Province who manage this on behalf of all citizens. One of the useful things about this broader kind of control is that it prevents one community holding another hostage over access to an essential resource. At present, ecosystem management fees linked to water access would be optional, but who is to say if that will continue to be the case once we wander down this path. Some might even see the current efforts by the Tribal Parks Alliance as little more than a thinly veiled form of extortion cloaked in soothing environmental jargon. If the TFN need further funding for their employment schemes their approach should be to the Federal Government either directly or through the treaty process, not their neighbours. Sadly, what the TPA upholds as a model of successful reconciliation, (and endorsement as a “tribal parks ally”) is unquestioning acknowledgment of First Nations rights and title to all lands they care to define as well as financial compliance by neighbour communities and businesses.

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Unfortunately, the DOT has, perhaps unwittingly, already leant some form of approval to this unilateral process by specifically stating that one of its 17 principles in the most recent strategic plan of September 2020 is to “Work with the Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks administration to ensure the protection of the Meares Island watershed, and explore the establishment of services fees. Initiate by January 2021.” DOT Strategic Plan 2021-2023, page 4. All 6 councillors at the time (including two of the three current Mayoral candidates) are pictured on the front of this document.

To be clear, I am a supporter of land claims settlement. There has been wrong that needs to be redressed. There is need for control over lands and resources in order for remote communities to have some hope of financial self sufficiency. The maintenance and recovery of language and culture can only happen if communities have some way to thrive. However, the only way this will happen in a genuine spirit of reconciliation is if this process is one of openness, transparency and negotiation. What is being imposed by TPA is well short of this and I am troubled that the DOT and the current council are not holding the TFN to a more inclusive standard.

In addition what municipal gov’t contracts for the supply of such a vague and ill-defined product as “protection”? It suggests the arrangement is more of a political agreement. This is a misuse of our hard-earned dollars we understand to be properly spent on the cost of service. And lastly it was suggested to me by one councillor that the 1% fee is little different than moneys collected by a local whale watching company to fund research. I offer that it is very different indeed. On the one hand you have a private company raising money voluntarily offered by its patrons for a specific purpose. Here we have the District compelling every citizen who uses water, essential to our existence here, to participate and enter into their dubious political arrangement. It is just not on. Support political causes with your own money councillors not with the public’s money.

If you share this concern or any others, time is of the essence. Four councillors will make a decision as to whether our tax dollars will go to the Tribal Parks Alliance on Tuesday Feb 23. They need to hear from all.

From The Directors of the Tofino Ratepayers Association

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