

Date: Wednesday, May 7, 2008

From: Dave Munroe
Howe Island

To: Mayor and Council, Township of Frontenac Islands

Dear Mayor and Councillors of Frontenac Islands,

I am writing with regard to the upcoming discussions on the Official Plan for the Township.

My suggestions will probably be somewhat controversial, but I would like to make them in any case. I feel they deserve some discussion at the council table.

Please allow me to preface my suggestions by quickly revisiting the recent OMB hearings regarding the Howe Island quarry. This will provide a framework for my suggestions. I ask you to read what follows with an open mind, and try to determine how these concerns might best be addressed.

As you know, an agreement was signed on Monday April 14, 2008 between Temper-All/Dan Keyes and the beHIRD group which opposed the re-opening of the old quarry on Howe Island. The OMB hearings were the result of widespread opposition to the quarry, and were an expense for many people on many levels. Hopefully the hearings were not too much trouble for council members, but hopefully some lessons were learned by the Mayor and council as well. Rendering land use decisions which make good sense and minimize friction between neighbours is a fundamental aspect of good government, and council's decision on the quarry obviously ignored this basic rule.

To get right to my main point, I think it's fair to say the OMB hearings highlighted some fundamental problems with the governance model presently in place on Frontenac Islands. In my opinion, these problems point to the need for immediate and effective structural change at the Council level. Let me stress that I am not looking at personalities or individuals here: I am looking at structural, organizational problems. Let me also stress that I am not trying to revive the quarry debate.

I am trying in this letter to demonstrate that the quarry decision is symptomatic of deeper problems that will not go away unless council deals with them.

Without revisiting every error that was made by council on the matter of the quarry, I think any fair observer would admit that from Howe Island's point of view, a travesty of governance occurred when approval was given to re-zone the Keyes property. While it is a matter of record that the vote was carried by a majority of councillors, it is also a fact that the majority of these councillors were not residents of Howe Island, and they completely disregarded a petition which was signed by a clear majority of Howe Island residents, stating unequivocal opposition to the quarry. Under any healthy, properly functioning democratic model, something like this should never occur.

If the OMB hearings did not provide council with opportunity to reflect on this, then please allow my letter to serve as a gentle reminder. I urge all council members to resist the temptation to regard the OMB hearing as some sort of Municipal victory, or as an endorsement of the way council operates. Council's time would be much better spent calculating the true long-term cost of the ruling in terms of public trust and confidence, which - at least on Howe Island - has largely evaporated. This is a strong statement, I realize, but I don't think this is an understatement. This is a serious situation.

On Howe Island, the quarry decision is widely regarded as a watershed low moment in Howe/Wolfe relations, and before any real progress is made on the Official Plan, this reality should be recognized and dealt with by council. I urge council to carefully review all aspects and repercussions of the rezoning decision, and not be too eager to "let bygones be bygones" and try and forget about the whole thing. To my mind, a review of the Official Plan is rather pointless if Council does not have the full trust and confidence of Howe Island residents, and at this point, Council can no longer claim this.

I say this not as a mere “sour grapes” taxpayer who didn’t get his way on the quarry issue, but rather as someone who genuinely cares about Howe Island, and was part of a very large group of residents whose opinions were devalued and then dismissed by a council dominated by Wolfe Island councillors. (Let me remind other readers that ever since its inception, Frontenac Islands Council has been dominated by Wolfe Island councillors; that’s the way the council was structured when amalgamation occurred in 1998. Of the total 5 seats, Wolfe Island always occupies 3) The quarry decision was not a minor procedural error made by Frontenac council, in other words: it was a decision with damaging implications. Council now has no reason to believe or claim it has regained the confidence of Howe Island residents simply because the OMB hearing is finished. The quarry re-zoning was a profoundly undemocratic decision, and deep & lasting injury was done to the Howe-Wolfe relationship by allowing it to proceed in the face of widespread opposition on Howe Island. This is largely the result of a governance model that doesn’t work properly.

I’ve made a point lately of raising this issue with every Howe Island resident I meet, and nearly every one I talk to expresses great disappointment and anger at the way the quarry re-zoning was handled. Hopefully Council (and provincial authorities) will recognize that this is a very troubling situation. There is also general recognition that the mishandling of the quarry is far more related to the unequal makeup of Frontenac Islands Council, than any particular ill-will on the part of individual councillors.

Howe Island was - and under the present model always will be - in a minority position at council, and as a community of only 2 islands, we need to recognize that this is fundamentally wrong. To Wolfe Island councillors this may seem like a nice arrangement, as the model always leaves them in the driver’s seat. To bureaucrats in Queen’s Park, the makeup of Frontenac Islands Council appears at quick glance to make sense: a mayor’s seat and 2 councillors for each island. Looks good, should work. In reality, of course, it’s an unworkable model. There are only 5 seats in total, and Wolfe Island was granted 3 of these, which left Howe Island forever in a minority position with only 2 seats. At ground level on Howe Island, this makes no sense and is an unacceptable arrangement. It has led to great resentment and some very poor decisions for Howe Island. After 10 years, I think all participants have a responsibility to admit this union is not working, and to start fixing the fundamentals. The province also has a responsibility to admit the present structure is not working. The Township of Frontenac Islands, to all intents and purposes, is a leaky rowboat. Common sense indicates that you don’t keep rowing across a large lake in a leaky rowboat, because things will only get worse. The solution is to find some dry land and and fix the damn leaks.

As I’ve suggested, I don’t believe the present dilemma is due to any great animosity on anyone’s part, as a great deal of local time and effort has gone into trying to make the Frontenac Islands idea work. Councillors and administrators are really to be commended on these efforts. But we must be honest about things too.

I realize that Council would like to move along now, on to less thorny, more enjoyable municipal issues, and not wallow in the mire of past decisions. I would like to do this as well. But as long as Howe Island remains an unequal partner on Frontenac Islands council, this is a recipe for friction and dissent. As I said before, Council no longer has the full confidence of at least one half of the Frontenac Islands “partnership”, and it now risks becoming farcical.

Now, with all that off my back, I’ll return to my suggestions for the Official Plan.

To my mind, the public confidence issue on Howe Island is by far the most important issue facing Frontenac Islands Council right now. In terms of the present review of the Official Plan, it completely outweighs search and rescue issues, windmill approvals, land use planning, infrastructure improvements, tax rates and all other municipal issues. Many Howe residents, myself included, feel the present political structure is so fatally flawed that we no longer attend council meetings. The quarry decision proved to us that popular opinion on Howe Island carries no real weight at council, and meetings have therefore become largely a waste of time. Howe Islanders are no different than any other residents: we don’t appreciate being governed by Councillors who do not live in our community and are entitled to override our opinions. To add insult to injury, Council meetings alternate between islands, so the net effect has really left Howe Islanders with a fraction of the democratic voice they used to have. Add to this the fact that Council discussions are typically dominated by Wolfe Island issues, and it becomes clear why Howe Island residents have felt completely disempowered for the last ten years.

Again, I stress this is not a personality issue, it’s a structural issue. And it’s not going to go away. My

overall point, as it applies to the Official Plan, is that it makes little sense to spend a lot of time and money trying to improve and tinker with the Official Plan, if the marriage itself is on the rocks.

Given all this, and the glacial nature of municipal governance in the province, I feel there are really only two ways of preventing egregious decisions being visited on Howe Island residents in the future. The first, and by far the most preferable, is for the two townships to de-amalgamate. This is the only sure way to guarantee equity for Howe Island at the table. The suggestion will raise hackles I'm sure, but given the present dysfunctional situation I think it deserves some serious debate by council. To my mind, the benefits of de-amalgamation completely overwhelm the perennial harm that will be done by remaining as geographically absurd Siamese twins.

As I suggested a moment ago, there are many reasons why the present arrangement is flawed. One of the most obvious and infuriating reasons is that all Frontenac Island residents are effectively barred from attending half of their very own council meetings, because a total of 4 ferry trips is required to attend any council meeting on the "other" island and get back home again. This is more than a deterrent, in my opinion - it's a concrete barrier to civic involvement. This is just one example, but the whole situation is patently ridiculous, and I think it's time council - and the Ministry - admitted this and began doing something constructive about it.

Therefore I would like to request that Frontenac Islands council, as part of its official Plan Review, make time for full and open discussion of these issues, and make serious inquiries as to how de-amalgamation might occur. At the very least, it would require Council members to discuss this "elephant-in-the-room" issue at length, and provide a starting point for remedial discussions with provincial authorities. If a plebiscite on Howe Island is required to accomplish this, then council should arrange for this. It shouldn't be hard to do: Howe Island only has about 500 residents. (Actually, I think a petition or plebiscite on Howe Island de-amalgamation is inevitable - it would be simply make things more amicable to have Council's blessing.)

I do realize that other efforts made in Ontario to de-amalgamate have not met with much success. Queen's Park has so far resisted engaging with any Ontario municipality in discussions about de-amalgamation, as this would imply poor judgement and open the door to a flood of similar demands. But this should not preclude us from at least trying. I think the Wolfe/Howe arrangement has been uniquely unsuccessful, so an effective case could be made. Our tiny size and relative lack of complexity would also work in our favour. Efforts in Quebec in the Montreal area were successful, for instance, so it's obviously not an impossible thing to do. (I do realize Quebec is a completely different jurisdiction.)

I wrote to former Municipal Affairs minister John Gerretson on Jan. 30, 2007 very specifically on this matter, during the quarry proceedings, and his reply to me was polite but discouraging: he advised me to accept the "status quo". He tried to suggest to me that the amalgamation had been requested by the islands themselves back in 1998, and I pointed out that this was in fact not the case, as the islands were left stranded by the larger Kingston Amalgamation process and were essentially coerced into the arrangement, and therefore had no choice but to "request" some sort of union. He then admitted I was correct in this.

Around the same time, (actually Jan 17, 2007) I also sent a long letter to Ms. Laurie Miller at Ministry of Municipal Affairs, outlining my objections to the Howe Island quarry but also describing in detail the governance situation on Frontenac Islands. At the time, I assumed someone would investigate the dilemma faced by Howe Island more closely. As far as I know, nothing has ever been done by the ministry on this, and I can only conclude that my concerns got buried in the debate over the Howe Island quarry.

However, without complete equity at the council level, it is unrealistic to believe friction between Howe and Wolfe Island will "level out" over the course of time. At the risk of being disrespectful, I don't think Mr. Gerretson fully grasped what is going on here. Howe Islanders are now being poorly served on two fronts: first, by a local council that has a vested interest in denying there is a problem, and second, by Queen's Park politicians who don't want to admit they erred in allowing these two tiny townships to be hung out to dry during the amalgamation process. But Howe and Wolfe Island residents are entitled to a model of governance that works, and if provincial involvement is required to resolve the matter, then the province should get involved. If it's something that can now only be dealt with at the local level, then Council needs to accept this responsibility. Hopefully, the present minister can provide some guidance on this issue.

In a perfect world, restructuring or de-amalgamation could be done with the stroke of a pen. That would be nice. But I'm guessing provincial approval or involvement will be required. This is fine of course, but we do need to make some movement on this. It has been 10 years since amalgamation and there has been zero progress on fixing the imbalance of Frontenac Islands Council. It's time to come up with a solution. To my mind, if multiple avenues are pursued during the Official Plan review process, some way of making Howe Island an equal partner would likely emerge.

It occurs to me of course that any preliminary vote on this topic might simply be defeated at the local council table, dominated as it is by Wolfe Island councillors, who largely believe the system is working just fine, thank you very much. This illustrates the ridiculous nature of the present model. Hopefully a responsible and mature approach to this would prevail. Please allow me to reiterate that my concern here is not about personalities or individuals: it's about the structure. The Frontenac Islands idea might sound charming and look good on a website, but it was a rather desperate idea in the first place. Without a bridge or fixed link, the arrangement will remain something of a logistical nightmare, an inherently unworkable idea. We need to admit this around the council table, carry forward our concerns to Queen's park, and come up with a solution. De-amalgamation is the simplest and most effective way of doing this.

The second, less preferable option would be to remain in the forced marriage, but introduce comprehensive amendments to the Frontenac Islands Official Plan.

Considering the Plan is now under review, this would be the logical time to generate discussion and make amendments of this sort, hence the timing of this letter. Of course it's possible that this sort of structural change is beyond the scope of any Official Plan Review, in which case other routes to the same solution would have to be found.

Ideally, the amendments I'm suggesting would address all the issues I've discussed, and acknowledge the inherent differences between the two islands, and embed guarantees that the autonomy and integrity of each of the islands within the flimsy framework of amalgamation would be respected. These amendments would be provided by separate articles within the Official Plan, to allow plebiscites on island-specific issues such as land and resource use and environmental preservation. There could be areas of wide mutual agreement between the islands of course, so I am not talking about a major rewrite of the Official plan. I am simply suggesting that specific articles be introduced, to guarantee Howe island absolute and complete equality at the council table, and provide assurances that all councillors, and most importantly the mayor, would be obliged to respect the decisions made by individual islands in the future.

I thank you in advance for giving these ideas fair consideration in the meetings ahead.

In the interest of open discussion and transparency, I am providing copies of this letter to Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Watson, as well as to Laurie Miller at the Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Housing, Glenn Tunnock of Tunnock Consulting in Perth, the Office of the Premier, as well as others.

Respectfully yours

Dave Munroe

191 Spithead Road , Howe Island