

Salt Spring Community Alliance

Report of meeting Monday, October 28, 2019

CRD Community Safety Funding Proposal

Thirty-three people met on October 28 to discuss the issues surrounding safety in Ganges and a proposal for CRD led funding that will build capacity to address this issue.

Background, as presented to the community in preparation for the meeting:

Recently, incidents of vandalism and aggressive behaviour in Ganges have generated concerns among some residents who report feeling fear in our village. Efforts to address these concerns have prompted a series of meetings involving groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Library, United Church, Copper Kettle, PARC, Community Services, and the RCMP.

In response to these concerns, CRD Director Gary Holman has proposed a new service with a maximum requisition of \$68,000 to support a number of possible activities ranging from crime prevention measures to street outreach. This proposal is intended to assist, administer, promote, organize, implement, and monitor community safety initiatives and programs on Salt Spring. An initial tax requisition of about half of the maximum allowed will cost the average household about 40 cents a month.

The CRD Director is proposing a counter petition process which is a more affordable option than a referendum. It will offer voters 30 days to register their opposition by signing petitions in posted locations. If over 10% of voters (approximately 885 people) register their opposition, the initiative will fail.

Meeting notes:

The following are the key themes that emerged from the three groups and large group summary.

Lack of information on the issue:

- Who is responsible for the violence and vandalism? Are we talking about our transient camping "residents", outsider professional criminals that are targeting SS because it is relaxed and open, or other residents with a propensity to violence?
- How much of this is going on and is this a seasonal issue?
- Is this retaliation against controls such as by law enforcement in parks? Is there something we can do to improve how we are communicating to our downtown people.

- How can we get the community of transients, homeless, boat dwellers, and camping population into the discussion? These funds must address this gap in communication.
- How much of this is a Mental Health issue and can this initiative do anything to resolve this issue and address this need in the overall community? Funds must make connection to and advocate for improved support services. Don't just blame homeless, likely more problems from substance abuse and mental health issues.
- How can we bridge the divide between those that are fearful and those that present a challenging lifestyle and generate fear in those that don't understand? Efforts to do this (such as Art Jam) need to be expanded and supported.
- Through this proposal we need to be sure we are gathering information and monitoring the impacts of any measure that is made.
- Are we monitoring gathering places such as the skateboard park and other parks in our community for safety to ensure vulnerable kids are not being targeted? The systemic problems of drug dealers and child prostitution are evident everywhere and SSI is not exempt.

Current infrastructure and services (or lack thereof)

- This funding initiative is one way the CRD can become active in a solution on an ongoing basis.
- RCMP is perceived to be understaffed and unable to do its job. Could this funding assist to fill in this gap in services? Would a Justice of the Peace be appropriate? RCMP cannot do a "beat" type of service. "Justice delayed is justice denied".
- We have outreach services that are under-resourced. Can we improve and expand this street outreach with longer hours, food, health services, either a mobile unit or a downtown house? Research other community initiatives that are addressing similar issues (Comox was suggested).
- We have a serious lack of Mental Health services in this community. How can these funds support, connect, or simply recognize the people who are struggling with drug addictions, lack of home, unstable food supply, and other vulnerabilities?
- Could this be solved simply and cheaply with security lights and cameras?

Fear

- Comments expressed show fear of the unknown and concern for safety, an “othering” where we remove ourselves from the issue and blame those different from us without really knowing how involved they really are.
- Some say they feel very safe in Ganges.
- Dog control is a real problem, both in population control and behaviour.

How we implement these new services

- We need to look forward to the future in our planning. Learning to work together with the thinking that the situation could escalate as climate change advances.
- Be mindful of what peoples’ needs are, with everyone taking responsibility.
- Utilize community circles with groups in Ganges such as United Church and Restorative Justice. Engage with people camping out and recognize they have valuable information to share.
- Create a “we” where we can share ideas and come up with a community agenda. Status quo is not working and yet we have a fabulous sense of tolerance here. We have the intention to do something important but first step is to recognize and correctly define the problem.
- Access off-island resources and expertise to assist with funding and strategic planning.
- Use funding for a hotline and more activities for youth.
- Encourage more evening events downtown to widen the community being in the area after dark. Get more folks on the streets.

Gary Holman in attendance offered these comments in closing:

This funding can help to identify the problems and get the various people together who know what is going on and what is needed. The service can include providing services and addressing the needs of the people in need. It’s not just downtown Ganges. This issue did worsen in the summer with problems escalating to vandalism. He has not prescribed how this money will be spent, or what the services are going to be, allowing further study over the winter. Once the funding is secured (approved by the community), spending will start in the Spring once the discussions with interest groups determine the best direction.

“This is not a panacea”, it will not solve the entire problem, but it can help take a small step in the right direction.

Who will make the decision? Informal stakeholder group already in place – Kees Ruurs chairing – meetings will be open to the public with stakeholders at the table. The CRD Director is responsible for the budget and how it is ultimately spent.

Rob Grant, CEO of SS Community Services commented:

This is a very complicated issue and this is a small step, getting local government involved will be helpful. This money will form accountability and for a CRD mandate to be involved that brings more decision making capacity. Don't know what the answers are. What will make the difference? We will not know until we get together with all those involved.

Action

People got together who were interested in connecting with and hearing from transients, “campers”, and others, who tend to gather in Ganges. They hope to hear this group's perspectives and needs, and to make plans for this community outreach.

People who wished to meet with Gary Holman also gathered to continue the discussion with him, and he said he is available to talk with anyone who would care to find out more.

Closing Appreciations

Alliance is a forum to find out what's going on.

All the problems are not caused by the homeless.

Appreciate the community – a lot of different perspectives.

SSI is the community that a relative newcomer feels the safest he ever has.