

# Time for public to be heard



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One evening after another in the spring of 1989 Tsawwassenites made their way to a public hearing to have their say on a proposed development for the Southlands. This ritual lasted a record-setting 26 days, partly because civic officials got some overly cautious legal advice and partly because, well, the people of Tsawwassen had a lot to say on the subject.

It's now 20 years later and the issue of Southlands development is back before the community thanks to a new proposal, this one by Sean Hodgins and the Century Group, and an effort to update the Tsawwassen Area Plan. What hasn't changed is that Tsawwassenites still have a lot to say. To date, however, opportunities to be heard have been limited.

I completely agree with Delta councillors that having an open mic at the tail end of a meeting is wholly inadequate in terms of hearing from the public. That's why last month's forum at the South Delta Recreation Centre didn't give those in attendance an opportunity to speak.

However, not providing members of the public a chance to air their views, particularly on a subject that's so near and dear to so many, doesn't seem like the right thing to do either. In fact, it seems rather un-Tsawwassen-like, a community that has a proud history of letting politicians know exactly where the citizenry stands.

I realize questionnaires and one-on-one discussions provided municipal staff and the area plan folks with a whole bunch of input, but there's something about having your say in an open forum, about listening to neighbours espouse both pro and con arguments, that can't be replaced. Not having such an exercise makes it feel like a step in the democratic process is missing.

There's no denying an open microphone has the possibility of turning even the best run and most well-intentioned meeting into a full-blown Gong Show. And when you ask people to comment on the Southlands, you're not looking at a one-hour or even one-evening type of undertaking.

It would be a lengthy, mine-filled road, and I can certainly understand the reluctance to travel it, but at some point, whether it's at a public hearing before Delta council adopts the area plan, or while that plan is being formulated, Tsawwassenites will have to be given a microphone.

Twenty years ago they showed up night after night because they had something to say. Attitudes toward the Southlands might have changed since then, but the desire to be heard remains.