The Commons Dream, 20 years on

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Sounder News

The Commons began as a dream: of a community coming together on shared land to use it in ways that would support the community while also stewarding and caring for the land -- and to do this through respectful, inclusive decision making.

Shelagh Huston, one of the founders, remembers it as a delightful chaos: "We had all these component bits: the zoning, the fundraising and deciding which kind of projects were going to fit within the bigger picture, and including all the voices in a consensual way, and refining it as a commons."

What this meant "wasn't clear initially," she recalls. Still, "that was the biggest and most profound way of articulating what we were trying to do."

The 26 acres of land that became the Commons had been a goat farm. It was purchased in 2005, drawing for the down payment on a bequest from Jay Mussell to the Amazing Grace Ecological Society (AGES), which had been formed before Jay died in 2004. Jay, Heide Brown and Shelagh Huston were its principals; Grace is Heide's granddaughter.

Shelagh remembers Jay saying at the time: "I want to do something good for the earth."

Heide wanted to create an elder eco-village "…where people can go and have green around them and 'if I want to eat kale, I can eat kale?'" she recalls.

Shelagh was the first and only employee at People for a Healthy Community (PHC) at the time, and knew "they needed space for their Food Bank and to do things."



Sounder file photos

ABOVE PHOTO: AGES directors Heide Brown (left) and Shelagh Huston on the deck of the farm house, overlooking the Commons in 2006. **LOWER PHOTO:** Lisa Butler and Pollen Heath constructing the Commons cob wall in 2007.



So she noticed when the goat farm property came back on the market in 2005 and called Heide. They formed what they called a "Hatching Committee," calling on friends and kindred spirits such as Deb Ferens, on the PHC board at the time, Lisa Butler and Pollen Heath, who helped set up the allotment gardens, and Judith Roux, who was helping organize discussions about sustainability at the Rollo Centre at the time.

There were many meetings at the Credit union where Heide and Shelagh agreed to be guarantors for the mortgage ("They took down everything we owned," Heide remembers: house, car, everything!")

"We checked with the RDN and Islands Trust if they would be in favour and they said yes, and then we had a meeting at Agi Hall. It was packed! We put it to the community – This was after Weldwood and there were hard feelings. So we didn't want to do anything that the community didn't want."

The support at that meeting was palpable. "Ken Capon was in tears," Heide remembers. "It was Ken's idea to have people sign up as monthly donors to pay off the [$400,000] mortgage."

The hatching committee was succeeded by a Steering Committee, with 13 members including Bob Andrew, Deb Ferens, George Szanto, Judith Roux, Linda St. Clair and Anna Bauer among its members.

George Szanto, who was also on the PHC board at the time remembers: "[At PHC], we were correcting things that had gone wrong as opposed to making something different." He put time and effort into creating the Commons Charter, emphasizing three foundational pillars: the ecological, the agricultural and the community/institutional, and also into shaping a governance structure around shared responsibility – "with people giving as much to it as they get from it."

The governance aspect drew in Bob Andrew, who had served as a trustee with Islands Trust when he lived on Salt Spring. Along with the others on the Steering Committee, he spent two years helping articulate a flat decision-making structure that would work for the Commons. "It became an attempt to create something with decision making from as broad a base as possible, a 'truer' form of democracy, from the ground up rather than top down."

Ken Gurr was the one who suggested calling this fledgling enterprise in ecological, agricultural and community self-governance a commons. "I brought this up to the group saying that in the truest sense of what Medieval and older village settlements had as areas for shared use and community gatherings, we were doing that here on Gabriola. The word and notion of a commons had gotten commercialized by developers, and we needed to take the use of the word and the power of the commons back!"

The Dream to Design visioning event (at the Haven) in 2005 attempted to outline what a 21st. Century commons might entail. Over 100 people contributed a list of 27 possible initiatives, including an Elder Eco Village, a wastewater wetland treatment centre, a bandshell, community gathering space, composting, rental facilities, theatre, dining area, playground, camping, meditation space, food depot/relief and skateboard park. Whittled down to those that the Agricultural Land Commission would permit on this land, part of the Agricultural Land Reserve, the list went forward. So did the long and tedious work of setting up the Commons Foundation, applying for charitable status and having the Islands Trust amend its bylaws to create a new Comprehensive Development Zone called a Community Commons – the first of its kind in Canada.

Before the end of 2005, PHC had become the Commons' first tenant. In 2006, the allotment gardens began and soon a fledgling team began work on a Commons covenant. In 2007, the Gabriola Commons Society was incorporated, and a monthly donor campaign launched. In 2008, the Commons Coordinating Council -- conceived as a place where all the self-governing teams (Farm, Property Stewardship, Finance, Trustees etc.) could share information and coordinate actions together, held its first meeting, and the Gabriola Commons Foundation was registered as a non-profit society with charitable status. In 2009, the foundation held the Commons' first AGM.

Twenty years on, the Commons has achieved a lot: a large community kitchen, rentable Farmhouse space, extensive solar panelling, trails and a boardwalk, a labyrinth, an orchard, allotment gardens, a kitchen garden and Little Field, all sustained with a complex irrigation system drawing water from the Commons pond and the 25,000-gallon reservoir, the Reservoir Stage and Timberframe for community gatherings and cultural events.

The dream of the commons continues. Heide still hopes that something like an Elder Eco Village might yet be build on the land.

As Shelagh thinks ahead, "it's always been in the back of my mind that we have to be ready for now: this hinge in history, when things would go completely off the rails. I was thinking of climate change and biodiversity loss…" For her, the Commons offers a way of preparing. Not just in its capacity to grow food and store water, and its covenanted commitment to the ecological health of the land, the woods and wetlands.

"It's also how we do things. How do we as humans get together with the land and work in ways that respect all beings? It's how we talk. How we gather….The actions that we do here are part of a covenanted relationship with the land.

"We are in relationship with the land or we die."

It seems fitting, therefore, that as the Commons seeks to build a relationship with the Snuneymuxw and honour its responsibilities to them, a Snuneymuxw Elder, Dave *Laxiya* (Bodaly) should have co-led a plant walk through the Commons woods (as part of the Sound Symposium held there) in August. As everyone stood around what settlers know as Ocean Spray, he called it by its traditional name --- *Qethelph*. He then seemed to almost call it into relationship with us as he explained how "when the seeds have dried and are a light brown colour, we would collect them in small batches and add water to mix it into a pulp and put it on a sore that is red and not healing properly, and it will draw the toxins out of our skin and allow it to heal."

Be part of the dream and the dreaming.

Join a Commons team.

Show up for a Saturday morning (10 a.m.) work bee.

Become a monthly donor.

The dream needs the whole community's involvement to thrive.



Sounder file photo

MEMBERS OF THE COMMONS IN 2011, celebrating the passing of the rezoning application. The Local Trust Committee adopted bylaws 258 and 259, re-zoning the property as, "Commons" - the first property zoned as such in Canada.



Sounder file photo

PREPARING THE COMMONS FOR GROWTH. Mike Phillips in 2006 on his tractor, helping to clear and till an area in what is now the Commons gardens. Volunteers picked rocks and planted a fall rye to enrich the soil, and discourage couch grass. Two pilot plots were used to grow garlic over that winter.

Gabriola museum

2025 Museum Talks

Where Land and People Meet: the Story of the Gabriola Commons

Join founding member, Shelagh Huston, for lively tales of the shared visions, contributions and ideals that birthed and grew our Gabriola Commons

Sunday, November 9

2 - 3:30 pm at The Gabriola Golf Club
Doors open 1:30
ADMISSION BY DONATION

IN CELEBRATION OF THE GABRIOLA COMMONS' 20th ANNIVERSARY YEAR

GABRIOLA COMMONS

More event info scan here

7 Stories takes audiences up and away

Gabriola Players 20th anniversary celebrated with remounting of first play the group ever performed

Gabriola Players

Gabriola Players is marking its 20th anniversary with a remounting of the first play the group ever performed, *7 Stories* by Vancouver playwright Morris Panych, in 2005. Performances will be at the Rollo Centre on November 13 to 15 at 7 pm, with a 2 pm matinee on Sunday, November 16.

The play opens with a man climbing onto the ledge of an apartment building seven storeys up, determined to end it all because his life has lost its meaning. However, he is constantly interrupted by a cast of bizarre characters who lean out their apartment windows and draw him into their chaotic stories.

"These absurd stories and characters make us laugh, get angry, and reflect on themes that are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago," says director Wendy Phillips. With a cast of 16 and a backstage crew of more than 15, the play brings together new and experienced island thespians who work closely together.

Several of those involved in this production were part of the original performance in 2005, and they are excited to return to the play that launched the Gabriola Players Theatre Society.

BJ Godson returns to her role as Joan, Jennifer Feenan is back, this time in the role of Lillian, and Jean Wyenberg returns as a consulting director.



Photo courtesy Bill Pope

LAURENCE LEE as 'Man' on left, with Reg LaPlante as 'Leonard' in the background, during a 2025 Gabriola Players rehearsal of 7 Stories. Performances start Nov. 13

The Gabriola Players was formed in 2005, after *The Vagina Monologues* the year before was performed by a group of friends to enthusiastic acclaim. *7 Stories*, the Gabriola original, was directed by Dandelion and launched 20 years of drama, comedy and pantomime that have kept island audiences entertained.

"It's a fitting tribute to two decades of live theatre on the island," Phillips adds, "because the stories we tell each other – and ourselves -- change lives."

The play does deal with some possibly triggering subject matter, including suicide, though the play brings the audience from dark to light with humour and exquisite dialogue. The Players chose to do a staged reading to allow more new actors on stage without the pressure of memorizing lines. Inclusion is a key goal for the Gabriola Players, and they would like nothing more than to see more people experience the world of theatre. Whether on stage or behind the scenes, it is an enthusiastic community of like-minded people who support and celebrate the achievements of all.

Mark those dates on your calendar, buy your $20 tickets at gabriolaplayers.ca and lose yourself for a couple of hours in a story that will transport you to a different world.

Good theatre is an adventure unto itself.

THE PORT THEATRE PRESENTS



PISUWIN
Atlantic Ballet of Canada

Friday, November 14, 2025 @ 7:30pm

An epic first-ever Wolastoq story-ballet from the award-winning director and choreographer Igor Dobrovolskiy. Featuring multi-disciplinary artist Nipahtuwet Naka Wespahtuwet (Possesom) Paul (Wolastoqiyik, Sitansisk First Nation) and set to the soaring music of Polaris Prize and Juno award-winning composer Jeremy Dutcher (Wolastoqiyik, Neqotkuk First Nation).

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We're grateful for the opportunity to live, work, and celebrate the Arts on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. hay ce·p q'a

LULU PRESENTS

Marina hasselberg
CELLO/ELECTRONICS

+

Sara magal
BRAZILIAN GUITAR/VOICE



7:30 PM
November 15. 2025
Phoenix Auditorium
Tickets:
online+Nova
luluperformingarts.ca