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The deconstruction of a rural town

Birds I View

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Seabirds are long-lived animals. A banded thick-billed murre from Greenland, like this one on the Gannets Islands in Labrador, was recently shot in Placentia Bay. The band confirmed that the murre was 30 years old. (Photo by Laura McFarlane Tranquilla)

“What’s happening in your town?” “This place has really changed.” “It’s just not the same.” These are just a few of the exasperating comments that I’ve been hearing from friends visiting our town.

I want to help stabilize development and preserve the rural environment and character of our community. So, I gladly accepted an invitation to work with the Portugal

Cove – St. Philips Town Council by joining a keen group of volunteer residents on a newly established Advisory Committee on the Environment [ACE].

Advisory committees are set up to aid in the creation of forward-looking strategies. Effective approaches are best ensured through long-term planning linked to committed courses of action. Otherwise, a chaos of continual crisis management can ensue, as always seems to the case with concerns about the environment.

In Portugal Cove – St. Philips [PCSP], we have such plans and commitments, including the town plan, the conservation agreement and a water management plan developed by ACE for the Council. If adhered to, these plans will help shape sustainable and environmentally appropriate development. If not, unnecessary environmental destruction will inflate long-term economic and social costs, including the quality of life for residents.

The high-density subdivision in the Western Gulley wetlands

Here's brief overview of how events culminated in the PCSP Council's approval of a high density subdivision in the Western Gulley wetlands. On 1 December 2014, ACE recommended that council defer decision on the proposed development until the water management plan was considered and councilors and town staff visited the site with environment committee members.

At the 2 December council meeting, the chair of the planning and development committee Councilor Collins moved to approve the subdivision proposal. Although the environment committee had only learned of the proposal a few previously. Councilor Collins stated that “no stone has been unturned” and that the proposal “has been beaten to death” for about a year. The motion was rejected as Council voted to defer a decision for 2 weeks while considering the watershed management plan.

Following site visits by ACE members, the committee on 10 December recommended that council reject the proposal to prevent unnecessary wetland destruction and to safeguard against serious long-term environmental and economic consequences for the town. It was also suggested that it would be prudent to await the ongoing provincial flood plain mapping exercise due in a few months.

Councilors and town staff were again invited to visit the site with environment committee members. The visit was important because if there was any question about development being in a wetland - walking the proposed roadway entails sinking over your ankles in mud and water. Only two councilors accepted the invitation; no staff did.

On 16 December by vote of 5 to 2, council conditionally approved the subdivision proposal. Following the vote, the chair of the planning and development committee Councilor Collins who introduced the motion apologized not once, not twice but three times to the developer in the audience for the delay in approving the application.

Death by a thousand cuts

The choices that we have about sustainable development in our community are rapidly being narrowed by these decisions. Where is the vision for Portugal Cove – St. Philips? And what is it? High density population growth? Witness the systematic dismantling of the rural character and environmental integrity of our community. At least some people live here for those qualities.

What's next?

For starters, there's phase 2 of the Western Gully wetlands subdivision. Phase 2 would increase the subdivision to about 60 small lot houses.

There's also the provincial flood mapping assessment due soon which will likely highlight the water retention capacity of Western Gully wetlands. And where will the tens of thousands of tonnes of water being held by the wetland go? The proposal calls for a retention pond. If it works [a big if], excess water that will no longer be held by the marsh will eventually flood roads and basements.

Had the majority of councilors simply walked the proposed development road and looked at the mud and water they were in, they might have voted differently. Though I doubt it, sometimes it is easier to obscure the obvious than to see it clearly for what it is.

Superficial lip-service to planning can be used to ignore common sense. A first tenant of decisions like this should be - do no harm. That way we might have a means of surviving town councils.

What can you do? I am not certain but if this type of destructive development concerns you, please do something. The environment committee bless their souls is working diligently to buffer the damage. And what – what can I do? My best hope is that I can muster the courage to stand in front of the bulldozer when it attempts to make its first wet and soggy cut into the marsh. Anyone want to join in?

An elder turr from Greenland

Just before Christmas, Brian Careen shot a thick-billed murre near St. Brides in Placentia Bay. The turr was banded, and Brian emailed the band number to the Danish banding office from whence it came. He then learned that the bird was banded in NW Greenland in 1988 as a breeding adult. As murrens usually begin breeding at 3 or 4 years, this murre would be in the order of 30 years old or older. It's the oldest known thick-billed murre I know of. The bird was banded by Kaj Kampp – a seabird biologist who visited here just about that long ago.

Birds in the area

On 8 February, more than 200 common eiders were flocking along the Straight Shore of Bonavista Bay. Curiously, almost 100% of them were white adult males, scarcely a female or immature male among them. The same day, a snowy owl at the start of the Cape Freels Road and a goshawk was in Musgrave Harbour the next day [John Gosse].

A stunning male ring-necked pheasant has been strutting his stuff on the Spaniard's Bay beach, possibly foraging for insects and amphipods among seaweed wracks. Ring-necked pheasants are not native to Newfoundland. Those here are escapes from locals who rear them. Previous sightings in Spaniard's Bay were made in May and October. If he's the same fellow, lets hope he survived the recent wintry blast.

Feeder watchers in Portugal Cove are seeing flickers, hairy and black-backed woodpeckers (Chantelle Burke, Bruce Somerton) and a secretive brown creeper (Rita Anderson). Flocks of American goldfinches have also been visiting Chantelle's feeder.

Rick West has captured some neat photos of a zebra-striped junco coming to his feeder. These rare partial albinos show up from time to time – keep looking.

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