

## Bog not always held in such high regard

It was just 20 years ago a massive development that would have doubled Delta's population was proposed for the ecological jewel

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It's hard to believe anyone today would seriously put forward a proposal to pave over one of the ecological jewels of North America, but that's just what happened to Burns Bog not that long ago.

The future of the bog and whether it should be maintained in its natural state was the hot issue in Delta 20 years ago. In the spring and summer of 1988, Deltans debated a controversial plan to build a \$10.5-billion city covering 6,000 acres of the wetland.

A couple of years earlier, a proposal was made to build a deep-sea port and major industrial development on 5,000 acres of the bog. That proposal sank, as did the subsequent application by Toronto-based Western Delta Lands Inc. to cover Burns Bog with a development that would have housed 125,000 people.



CREDIT: A conceptual drawing at Delta Centre, the major development proposed in 1988.

Called Delta Centre, the project was pitched as "an integrated community with full accessibility to modern technology and communications service to address the growing trade with the Pacific Rim Nations."

In a large advertisement in the Delta Optimist in May of 1988, the company promised that at maturity, the city would feature sheltered sidewalks, pedestrian laneways and pathways with "skycab" and "jitney" passenger service throughout the city core.

The company said the development would not be a self-sustained, suburban and isolated community. "It will instead be a fully connected, glass-fibre wired, integrated settlement for those who want to fully participate in building a better future for themselves and their children..."

In addition to housing, the proposal included a 10-berth seaport, "generous" container storage areas and a manufacturing and distribution complex.

Western Delta Lands, the development arm of the McLaughlin family, also noted environmental scientists identified just two areas of the property "where efforts to preserve it may still be warranted."

The development would have covered the largest domed peat bog on the west coast of North America. Named after Vancouver entrepreneur Dominic Burns, who at one time owned the

land, the bog sustains a unique ecosystem containing a wide variety of flora and fauna, including 24 mammal and 150 bird species.

The newly formed Burns Bog Committee, chaired by Eliza Olson, tried to raise public awareness that year, saying the development would have disastrous environmental implications. Later that year, Olson and others formed the Burns Bog Conservation Society.

The proponent behind Delta Centre submitted a survey to municipal council, indicating 36 per cent of respondents favoured the proposal, while only 27 per cent disagreed and a whopping 37 per cent were undecided.

However, when hundreds turned out for a public hearing that took place over several days in May of 1988, it was clear a vast majority were opposed. Many urged Delta council to reject the proposal outright or begin a study on the long-term impact on the ecological, environmental and social issues.

On June 22 of that year, council defeated the plan, but Alex Leman, planning consultant for Western Delta Lands, soon vowed the company would not walk away from the project.

"It's a huge parcel of land in an urban area that is well serviced by road, water and rail and can also provide excellent industrial and manufacturing opportunities," he said in an interview that summer.

However, the public had no appetite for such a development, says former Delta Mayor Doug Husband, who inherited the controversial proposal after he took office.

"I remember when we went into the public hearing that it was quite crazy. I wasn't back on council when the McLaughlin family, who owned the land, were told to come back with a plan for the land. It was a mega proposal that would have dwarfed anything we had. If you were going to do any planning, it should be in consultation with the community and municipality."

The end result was an even stronger public awareness of the ecological importance of bog, as well as a determination to somehow preserve it, he says.

Husband notes such a proposal would never reach the public hearing stage today, but times were different back then.

"Looking back, it seems absolutely goofy. But at the time, some people thought it had merit.

"At the time there wasn't a lot of consideration given to the sensitivity of Burns Bog, it was more about the development. But when we got into the public hearing, that is when all the sensitivity and environmental issues came up about Burns Bog, that it was the lungs of the Lower Mainland, and the wildlife and flora and fauna - all the things you and I know are the important issues today." Looking at how attitudes and awareness have changed, Husband notes most Deltans' attention after Delta Centre failed soon focused on the need to buy Burns Bog.

"Eventually, the municipality finally recognized it was a significant piece of land and maybe it should be purchased. That's when subsequent councils got involved and lobbied government to purchase it."

Olson, who recently attended an international peatland conference in Ireland where there was much discussion about Burns Bog, says she still can't believe such a proposal came forward.

"We were all dumfounded when they pushed this proposal that was being pushed by the town planner of the day.

"Fortunately, there were people who were really knowledgeable."

She credits much of the vital early community education about the bog to a small group that formed decades earlier.

In 1965, the Burns Bog Protection Society formed with the idea that a municipally-owned portion of the bog held great potential as a park. In 1966, the group was instrumental in a campaign to defeat a proposal to turn the site into a sewage lagoon.

By 1968, the protection society had generated considerable interest in the ecological value of the land. The botany department at the University of B.C. began testing that year to see if a drainage system adjacent to the bog had affected plant life.

Also interested in preserving the land in its natural state was the Nature Conservancy of Canada. In a letter to Delta council in 1968, the conservancy's Charles Sauriol said the land was rapidly disappearing under housing, industrial and highway development, and should be preserved.

In the summer of 1969, an editorial in the Delta Optimist noted the bog was becoming a "naturalist's mecca" where Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, high school and university students frequent to study its varied, condensed forms of nature.

In 1970, new science curriculum for schools encouraged the concept of outdoor education, so the bog preservation group seized the opportunity by convincing the Delta school board and council to develop an outdoor classroom concept.

"It is very difficult to get across this idea of ecology," the society's Doug Van Nes said that year. "This is virtually an untouched area and has been this way for 500 or a thousand years or more. I can't think of another area within 100 miles where you can walk through and say, 'This is what it was like.'"

He also warned, "Population is rapidly coming into the area and daily we see damage."

School trustee John Robinson echoed the sentiment of his colleagues in 1970 that the bog had "tremendous educational value."

The following year, funding was made available through the Opportunities for Youth project for high school and university students to catalogue the flora and fauna of the bog, clear trails for public use and construct a lookout tower for student observations.

The Delta Nature Reserve, located on a 148-acre municipally-owned parcel, was unveiled in October of that year. It provided an outdoor classroom for students in Delta and throughout the Lower Mainland. That year, project member Harold Klassen, a teacher who did his master's thesis on outdoor education, said Burns Bog should be used "to instill within students and public a reverence for all living things."

The protection society, which never formally registered, eventually disbanded, but Olson says thanks to the work of those early advocates and students, a massive uproar was sparked when the Delta Centre plan came around.

"When they had used the nature reserve as an outdoor classroom, they had educated a whole group of kids which helped defeat the proposal. Some of these kids understood and some of them dropped off something like 20,000 leaflets door-to-door.

"That is what shook these developers. When council voted against it, I remember Doug Husband, who was the mayor of the day, didn't have to say one word, because it was obvious it was going down. But he gave an absolutely marvelous speech saying he hoped never in his lifetime would he have to see such a proposal again."

Olson also gives credit to a 1988 speech at Seaquam Secondary by renowned biologist and environmentalist David Suzuki.

"He didn't talk about the bog per se because he said he didn't know anything about bogs at that time. But what he talked about was the importance of the community taking responsibility for looking after its environment."

Over the last two decades there were other threats to the bog, including a plan by Western Delta Lands to build a \$94-million racetrack on 350 acres. That proposal fell through in 1993 when the B.C. Racing Commission rejected it.

In 1999, two years after the conservation society presented a 25,000-name petition to the B.C. government calling on it to preserve the bog, a proposal was pitched to build a giant entertainment centre that would have included a new home for the PNE. When the plan was unveiled, former NDP tourism minister Ian Waddell called it a "win, win, win" that would have preserved part of the bog. However, many warned the viability of the ecosystem couldn't be maintained if a large portion was covered with asphalt.

After hearing the public outcry against the scheme, Delta council turned down the proposal and urged the province to acquire the bog to save it from development.

Things started looking brighter in 2004 when four levels of government - federal, provincial, regional and municipal - purchased about 5,000 acres of the bog for \$73 million. Creating the Burns Bog Ecological Reserve, the partners, wanting to make sure the site was maintained using the best science available, agreed to come up with an overall management strategy.

Ironically, the Burns Bog Conservation Society has been left out of that process, even though Olson points to the wealth of expertise and research materials it can provide.

In 2008, many bog advocates are warning times haven't completely changed as the delicate ecosystem faces another threat with the proposed South Fraser Perimeter Road.

Part of the provincial Gateway Program, the new road would accommodate an increase in truck traffic as a result of port expansion at Roberts Bank.

Carrying an estimated \$1 billion price tag, the new highway would cut through South Delta farmland and go along the edge of Burns Bog.

The Environmental Assessment Office had been reviewing the proposal and a spokesperson recently said a final report was submitted in June to various provincial ministers. They will decide if an environmental certificate should be granted.

In response to serious concerns raised by Environment Canada about the impacts to the bog, Gateway agreed to several mitigation measures, including a slight shift in the alignment so it's further away from the wetland.

The monitoring and mitigation should address concerns raised by federal reviewers, Gateway environmental manager Malcolm Smith wrote in a recent letter to the EAO and Transport Canada. He noted it's the provincial Ministry of Transportation's opinion the project "will not cause any significant environmental affects."

However, the alignment shift now has the road cutting further into farmland, which has angered the farming community.

The Delta Farmers' Institute claims Gateway is guilty of serious errors and omissions.

In a letter to the EAO, institute president John Savage stated, "What is very clear to our members is that moving the SFPR alignment west of Crescent Slough and onto actively farmed agricultural land will have an added negative impact on farming and ironically may result in no benefit to wildlife habitat or the hydrology of Burns Bog."

As the debate about the new highway continues, Olson is quick to point out Burns Bog is much bigger than the designated conservancy area purchased by government. She notes a vast surrounding area is also part of Burns Bog, but it's used for other purposes, including cranberry farming and the Vancouver Landfill. She hopes one day even more of the land can be purchased for preservation.

"There's this realization how important these peatlands are and how fragile they are. For example, only three per cent of the Earth's surface is covered with peatland and 10 per cent of the world's greenhouse gases are coming from the destruction of them. So, you have this small amount covering the Earth storing this huge amount of carbon."

She notes that while governments in Europe are trying to protect their peat bogs, there is no consistent effort in Canada.

"We really should be doing something, we've got a treasure here, especially with global warming."

Hoping to build an interpretive centre, the bog conservation society celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

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