

Gibsons' exit from ports creates funding vacuum

SCRD



John Gleeson photo

Gibsons council's decision to opt out of the Sunshine Coast Regional District ports function was prompted in part by costs that are expected to be part of the ongoing expansion of Gibsons Harbour.

OCTOBER 11, 2013

JOHN GLEESON/STAFF WRITER

Town of Gibsons taxpayers will be off the hook for the Sunshine Coast Regional District (SCRD) ports function starting next year, SCRD directors agreed last week.

But directors are also asking staff to reduce the ports budget to fill the funding vacuum and offset increases in taxation for the remaining funding partners.

The annual contribution from the Town was \$44,000 this year, representing 20 per cent of the function's \$222,500 budget.

That money, Gibsons director Gerry Tretick told the infrastructure services committee on Oct. 3, is needed to fund the ongoing expansion of Gibsons Harbour, which began earlier this year with the construction of a concrete float and ramp.

"There are a number of other phases that will cost a considerable amount of dollars," Tretick said, adding that the federal small craft harbours branch has "indicated clearly" that the Town should contribute more to the facility.

Taxation for the ports budget has risen significantly since 2001 when the SCRCD took over ownership of nine federal docks — four on Gambier Island, two on Keats and one each on Thormanby, at Halfmoon Bay and at Hopkins Landing.

The divestiture process was based on a referendum that established areas B, D, E and F and the Town as funding partners.

West Howe Sound director Lee Turnbull, whose area funds more than 30 per cent of the function, said the Town was making a "fair request" and urged the board to "allow Gibsons to withdraw and use that money to upgrade the dock in their area, which we all use and enjoy."

Turnbull said it makes more sense to treat ports as a rural function.

"We should thank the Town of Gibsons for assisting us and allow them to withdraw," she said.

Elphinstone director Lorne Lewis spoke against granting the request. Elphinstone came into the function by referendum because people felt it "would make boating safe on the Sunshine Coast by having a number of docks available here and there that people rely upon," he said.

"That was the community sentiment when we got into this," he said. "To me then, I'm ethically bound by the referendum, and if I wanted out of this function, I believe it should be by referendum. So I don't understand how the Town can unilaterally say 'we want out' without going to their people."

Other directors, however, agreed with Turnbull, and in the end the vote was unanimous to recommend the board approve Gibsons' request to withdraw.

Directors, however, expressed serious concerns about the potential increase in taxation for the remaining funding partners. In a follow-up recommendation, staff were asked to report back on "how the ports service function will operate in future years utilizing only the current funding contributions from the four participating electoral areas."

In addition to the \$44,000 loss from Gibsons' contribution, staff reported there is a planned \$51,000 increase in taxation for ports in the 2014 budget.

"So we would be looking at a very substantial increase in taxation should things remain as they are," Roberts Creek director Donna Shugar warned.

CAO John France said staff could reduce the planned \$51,000 in expenditures. "But that would ignore some of the things you've already approved in principle ... such as repairs to the docks," he said.

"It's not just adding \$51,000 to the 2014 budget," Shugar replied. "It's also withdrawing \$44,000 from the ports budget. This may be one of the situations where tough decisions have to be made."

As provincial approval is needed to authorize Gibsons' withdrawal from the function, staff were directed to expedite the relevant documents to complete the process by the end of the year.

In making his case to the committee, Tretick said Gibsons' harbour expansion will benefit the whole region.

"Our focus is on providing an economic development port function for the whole of the south Coast, not just for Gibsons, because it does serve the fishing fleet, it serves the transportation of goods to the islands, it serves as a collection point for waste management, and it also serves for tourism in terms of potentially increasing the amount of moorage available, which is in short supply."

Calling it "an unpolished jewel," he said the harbour's "potential is tremendous."