

Playing fields, incorporation and what comes next: An interview

By Brian Lee

In the fall of 2002 John Rees was elected Area A Director for the Sunshine Coast Regional District.

“At first I thought it was a matter of showing up to discuss Area A issues,” Rees says from his sunroom overlooking Bargain Harbour.

“But I soon found out that you’re a small part of a larger group.”

Since his election, Area A (Middlepoint to Egmont) has been the fastest growing area on the entire Sunshine Coast in terms of development applications and property assessments.

The accompanying growing pains — and boost in the proportional tax support — have brought Area A issues into the forefront of SCRCD directors and planners.

The director’s workload has grown along with these changes ensuring that effective representation at the SCRCD has never been more critical.

Rees’ term is up at the end of

October and it is not yet clear who could replace him.

The job is tremendously rewarding but also very demanding, requiring attendance at up to 200 meetings per year, many of which require 100-plus pages of advance reading in the form of agendas and related material.

Those board meetings, standing committee meetings (infrastructure, community services, planning corporate services etc.), transport, policing, health board/watershed, public hearings, area planning committee and other public meetings have meant that some days Rees leaves home at 7 a.m. and doesn’t return until 11 p.m.

For this he receives a salary of \$8,000 per year plus \$100 per meeting — Rees netted \$23,200 for 2007, of which one-third is tax-free.

Clearly it’s a full-time job without full time pay.

“It’s probably one of the most

interesting jobs I’ve ever had. It’s very rewarding but it can also be very disappointing as well,” Rees says.

“It’s not as easy as having the position and simply going to the regional district and getting it done. There are so many procedures and there are so many other people involved that possibly have to share the cost so you have to sell your issue, you know?”

Rees cites a recent discussion regarding an upgrade to the Tetrahedron access road where he caught flak for referring to the users of the Tetrahedron as “an elite group” and opting Area A out of the funding.

He explains that, because the municipalities of Sechelt and Gibsons, (which have half of the population of the Sunshine Coast) don’t pay into the regional parks department, the cost would be shouldered mainly by the people of Halfmoon Bay and Area A.

Director Rees: So it’s not an issue that a senior citizen sitting in Garden Bay would like to be spending their tax dollars on because they’re never going to get there.

So what you have to try to do is to identify areas where your community can share in the usage — Dakota Ridge is a classic example.

That is a regional function and I’m pleased that we’re in it.

One day kids from here will be up there cross-country skiing.

The biggest example was when the major recreation projects came before the regional district.

All of the areas tried to get Area A into it. It cost \$22 million for the Sechelt Pool.

It’s a gorgeous facility but we already have a pool.



with Area A Director John Rees

Director Janyk (Gibsons) is always sniping at Area A and it's because we pay a larger portion of the overall tax base than they do.

For example: If all eight are in, Gibsons pays 10 per cent because their property assessment is \$650 million.

Our property assessment is \$1.1 billion and we pay 17 per cent.

Spiel: *Then do you think this example justifies another look at incorporation or what are your thoughts on whether or not incorporation is feasible?*

Director Rees: Yes it will be feasible but incorporation, the way it was approached last time, will not work.

If you only take Pender Harbour which is Madeira Park and Garden Bay and incorporate on that basis – you would have a very difficult time in making it.

The reason for that is you are cutting out probably 40 per cent of the tax base by cutting out Sakinaw Lake, Ruby Lake, Egmont and Middlepoint.

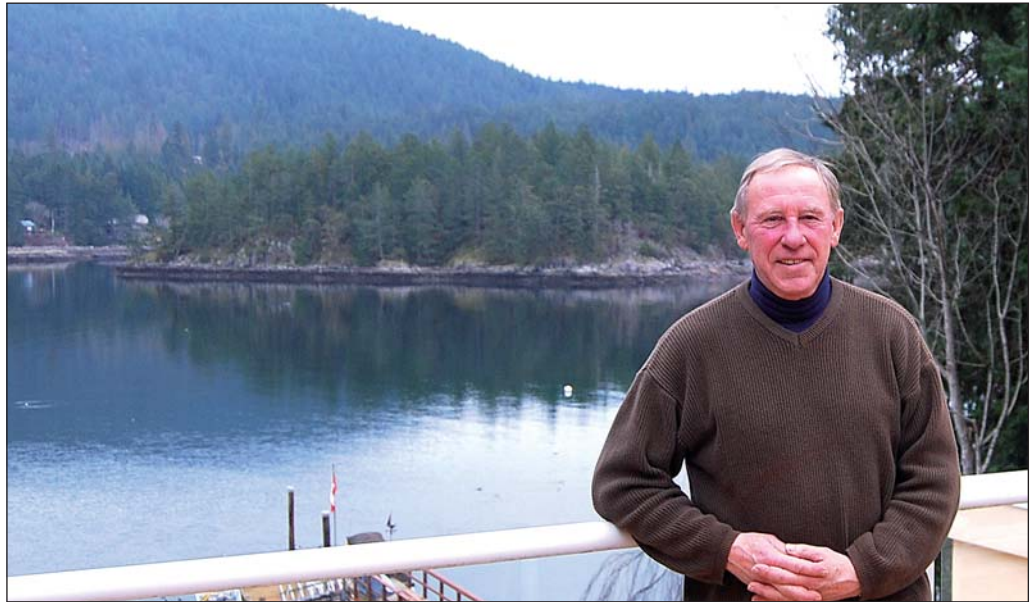
If you could have those areas included in incorporation – almost like a mini-regional district – then it would work.

But you would have to hang on to that tax base, otherwise the taxes would increase dramatically.

Sometimes I feel incorporation is the way to go but then when I look at the numbers I realize it would be too difficult.

Spiel: *Is it possible to include Ruby Lake, Sakinaw and Egmont?*

Director Rees: The provincial government would certainly have a say in it because they would have



Most would have a hard time believing that Area A Director John Rees was elected only 6 years ago — at the tender age of 29. Potential candidates to replace him should take note.

some concern whether or not a new incorporated area could manage those outlying areas.

But now that we have a better handle on water, I certainly feel that we could provide the services that the regional district could... maybe with one or two exceptions.

And those exceptions we would be buying from the regional district anyways.

For instance, we'd be buying the planning services because it would be too expensive to set up a planning department.

Gibsons buys all kinds of services from the regional district.

They buy landfill. They buy recycling. They buy transportation, recreation and a number of other issues that they, as a municipality, are not capable of providing.

A smaller community like Pender Harbour would be buying more services.

My concern is that when you're a municipality, you maintain all of

the roads. With less density and long roads, we would be up to here in road maintenance costs...

The problem we have is our geography and it really is against us as far as incorporation is concerned.

What I would like to see is the development of a satellite office here and I think that's extremely important. You could get all the regional district services through that office.

Our tax base is increasing all the time because of assessment — it increases faster than anybody else's because of assessment — so there's more money coming out of Area A to support regional district functions and I think we should be offering more services to Area A.

For instance, Elphinstone has 4,000 people and they pay 7 per cent of the regional district budget. Area A, 2,600 people, pays 17 per cent.

In essence, Area A pays as much as Elphinstone and Gibsons together

continued next page

Interview with John Rees (cont.)

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Spiel: *Do you think we’re getting an equitable share of the money we pay into the SCRD in terms of services etc.?*

Director Rees: Basically, yes.

When I first went into the regional district, one of my goals was to get a sports field built in Pender Harbour.

I found out there was already a major playing field issue underway, the Shirley Macy field in West Howe Sound.

The function only has the capacity to build something like that one at a time so I found that I had to get in line. So I got in line and supported the completion of the Shirley Macy field and along the way, politically, looked for the support that we were next because there were others like Connor Park.

Another issue is the landfill where we lose money every year and that’s picked up by the Sechelt landfill, so that is an equity switch.

Spiel: *Looking back over the past six years, what would you say are your proudest accomplishments that have come through the Area A director’s job?*

Director Rees: When I was campaigning, I went up to Egmont and met with a few different groups... to get a feeling of the chemistry of the area.

One group told me that they’d like to get going with a fire department and another group were talking about the Skookumchuck Heritage Society and then another group wanted to try to do something about the drinking water.

Well, right at the moment, we have a fully financed fire department and I’m telling you that was a lot more difficult than I ever imagined it would be.

It entailed numerous, numerous meetings and legal issues. So now we have a fully trained staff and a fire hall nearing completion and we have some equipment.

Some wonderful things happened there. For instance, Dean Bosch turned around and donated one acre of property.

Then Geoff Craig and his group needed support to try to get Crown land for the Skookumchuck Heritage Centre so there was a lot of work, to work through Crown land and the forestry department and then to support them for grant applications.

When I was first elected, one

of the campaign issues was the school district plan to sell off their properties.

We had three properties that concerned us in this community: Egmont, Irvine’s Landing and Madeira Park.

Egmont now is a little park for the Egmont community... maintained by the regional district.

Probably by February, we’ll sign the lease with the school district for the old Irvine’s landing school as a community hall meeting place for the north shore, Irvine’s Landing, Garden Bay and Daniel Point, for all those folks to get together and have a real community.

I don’t know if you can recall but about three years ago, the provincial funding was withdrawn from the community school and it looked like that was it.

But we were able to put a package together to save them and in addition to that, I was able to convince the rest of the regional district to put in place some support funding for community schools – all five of the community schools.

So I think that really helped.

Another little issue is I arranged for sustainable funding for the Coast Guard Auxiliary and finally after years we have this little pilot transit project getting ready to go.

When I was first elected, the tourist information funding was not in place and I restored support funding for that through the Chamber of Commerce so that the information centre remained open and the public washrooms were maintained.

But above all is the Area A Water Master Plan. That’s the achievement I’m probably most proud of.

Something to Squirrel away?

SECURE, HEATED SELF-STORAGE to 5x10 ft.
Central Madeira Park, next to Speed Bump Alley

SQUIRREL STORAGE

LARRY & LINDA CURTISS

CALL 883-2040



Interview with John Rees (cont.)

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build an economic base. That means they need lands.

I don't think they ever had any intention of interfering in fee-simple land, but what I think they're looking for is some economic value for supporting a development issue. In other words they want their piece of the pie.

You can't blame any government for trying that.

I also feel that the Sechelt Indian Band is being a little bit overwhelmed with all of the referral information... they're being faced with coming from the pace of development.

Spiel: *About a year ago the SCRD signed the Protocol Agreement with the Sechelt Indian Band and it was touted as a new age in relationships with regional governments and the SIB and a year later they seem to be saying "that's not enough." What happened?*

Director Rees: One of my biggest disappointments and frustrations has been with negotiations and discussions with the Sechelt Indian Band and it began over four years ago with the foreshore applications issue.

There never has been a promise by them to come to grips with that.

To make some decision... they've communicated with the province on that issue and the province will not communicate with local government on that issue. We've been boxed out and can't get any answers.

But my most recent disappointment was when seemingly I had full support from the SIB on the sports field complex... but when we made an application for the additional piece of property and the province then sent the referrals out..., the SIB responded

with a 14-page objection to that based on the fact that it was historical hunting grounds for their community.

But recently the province has said, "We support your applications... providing that all of the referrals are positive." That is a disappointment.

The foreshore is a frustration because we can't get to it. When I was talking to the provincial government on the foreshore application they said 'Do you have a protocol agreement?'

So I researched all of the protocol agreements... and we did it! To me it was one of my best accomplishments.

I was chair of the board at that time and worked very hard to get that done. Well, it turns out that it's one-sided, right? They're not respecting the responsibilities that we have to our residents to do local government management and control.

What they wanted (from the SCRD) was all of the information on what was going on so they could identify possible archeological sites — and when I say "Pender Harbour is under the gun" it's because this is where they all are.

There's very few in Halfmoon Bay and there's some in Sechelt but the rest of the Coast is under the Squamish Nation and they don't seem to give a s**t about that area at all.

So the problems start here and that's one of the difficulties. If it was the entire Coast you would have everybody come together and say we have to go to the government on this issue but right now it's only the Halfmoon Bay and Pender Harbour areas and part of Sechelt.

Spiel: *What are your plans when you finally finish your term at the end*

of October?

Director Rees: One of the plans is that we'll be able, for the first time in 10 years, to have a winter holiday.

I could never take a winter holiday because of the budgets that always come in January, February and March and I've chaired most of the budget meetings. It's a critical time — if you're not at the budget meetings your community is going to pay more taxes (laughs).

I've got lots of grandkids growing up and I noticed over Christmas how they go from that size to that size when you don't see them for awhile. And I'll just spend more time with my wife.

Spiel: *So you don't have any plans to jump into another role or have any other political aspirations?*

Director Rees: Nothing. I missed an opportunity three years ago to run for the province but ...

Spiel: *Well that job could be available soon...*

Director Rees: No, I'm too old now!

Now I know what to do — I'm too old — I'm finished.

Not that I haven't enjoyed it.

I've enjoyed the work and it's been a privilege for myself and for my family to represent the people in the community but enough is enough, you know?

It's time to bring on some new energy.