

Presentation to the Mahone Bay Town Council

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**GETTING BACK ON TRACK: REVITALIZING MAHONE BAY THROUGH CITIZEN
PARTICIPATION**

by

Valerie Hearder

for

Friends of the Mahone Bay Woods and Soccer Field

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Introduction and Summary

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you.

The Friends of Mahone Bay Woods and Soccer Field is an informal group of neighbours and concerned citizens, many of whom have endorsed what I have to say in this presentation. It is also the name of a web-site. We put the web-site together in order to give people a forum for sharing information and opinions. I invite you to visit the web-site at mahonewoodsandfield.net

I asked to make a presentation to Council because I am very concerned about what is happening in Town as a result of the Council's acceptance of the development concept for the Old School Property.

People's fears, questions and concerns have deepened as a result of the public meeting on June 6.

A list of these concerns would be long and I am confident you know those that have already been expressed. I will highlight just one of them and summarize the rest.

The concern I would like to highlight is this: By unanimously endorsing the developer's rough, preliminary, uncertain and very changeable plan, the Town Council appears to have given the developer an unconditional license to do what he wants. Many times during the meeting on June 6 when a question or concern was raised, the Mayor or the Developer replied that "this is just a concept". This is very disturbing. I want to be sure that you understand that many of us are saying we do not agree with this development, and we do not want it pursued. In addition, I do know, and have spoken to, people who are supportive of the ideas of housing for seniors and young families but who do not believe in this particular development.

There are many more concerns - from the lack of independent public needs analyses to show that this development will meet actual needs in this Town, through every phase and aspect of the concept, to the lack of publicly available spreadsheets to demonstrate that all costs and benefits have been factored in and that the concept will provide real benefits for the Town under all reasonably predictable scenarios.

People agree readily that this Town needs some economic development, that property costs are high and that we should be trying to bring young families into the community while also helping seniors in need, but many do not think this is the way to do it.

Summary of Suggestions

There are three things that I would like to suggest to Council, and they are the basic principles of this presentation.

- **One**, please put in place a fair, transparent, and responsive **consultation process** to deal with the issues, fears and divisions that are now running through the Town.
- **Two**, please freeze the negotiation with the developer and protect the parks and playing fields of our **public land** while the Town makes important decisions that are vital to our future.
- **Three**, please harness the talents and energies of this community around **the Town's priorities and future**. I suggest we start by taking specific actions related to attracting young families and by dealing with the needs of our children and elders, without the added confusion of having to deal with a massive, publicly engineered, economic development proposal the likes of which this Town has never seen.

1. Process

(a) **The Public Meeting of June 6, 2007**

There are a number of citizens who believe that the Council has done the deal. I do not mean in the narrow legal sense but that the Council will use its powers to make the development concept real.

That perception was not lessened by the meeting on June 6, it was deepened.

Against the wishes of the majority, who wanted the meeting to continue, it was brought to an end, with no idea of where we are going next. This led me to call for a continuation of the public process. I understood the Mayor agreed.

(b) **The Citizens' Meeting**

The meeting I suggested is now tentatively planned for June 21, 2007. I am here to confirm the invitation and extend it to you all. I have talked to the Mayor about the plans. When final arrangements are confirmed notices will go out. This should happen in the next day or so.

(c) **The Town's On-going Consultative Process**

In addition to this citizens' meeting I believe that questions and concerns about the process that the Town will follow should be addressed and publicly announced.

There is divisive and harmful talk in Town. I do not like it. I believe in an open, informed and responsive consultative process. This town is one small neighbourhood and we must create opportunities to move forward in a constructive and positive way.

Where are we going? Council can allow the fears, concerns and divisions to persist, or you can stop them now by announcing that this concept is not going to be pursued and that we will be looking at new options.

If you announce that this concept will not proceed, then we still need transparent responsive and credible **consultative processes** for addressing the needs of the Town and the future of the **public lands** that make up the old school property so we can continue the vital constructive dialogue that has been started in this Town about its **priorities**.

If you are planning to persist with the development concept, we need to know that. I believe that we should know how you will proceed, and I am asking you to please give us the detailed step by step procedures and timetables you plan to follow.

If you are planning to negotiate with this developer to advance this concept – and I am asking you not to do that - then please tell us.

The revitalization of Mahone Bay requires the input of its citizens. You, our representatives, work hard for this Town and we do appreciate that. But this Town belongs to all of us. One of the most important ways to turn that sense of belonging to a commitment to the changes that are needed is through **consultation** between Council and the people - consultation that allows for input, leads to an accommodation of people's needs and aspirations, and delivers support. That is why I am asking that you put in place a fair, transparent, informed and responsive consultation process.

2. **Public Land**

There is real concern about the fact that this development requires public land.

There are many who fear that the Council has committed to selling this invaluable property at a fraction of its market value for a major development that will deliver a windfall to a single developer.

While I understand that the Council may be responsible for managing this land on behalf of the Town, it is not the Council's land. It belongs to all of us. As citizens we are disturbed when we see our Council using the Town's land as if the Council is a private land owner in partnership with a developer.

I would like to see the playing fields and woods preserved for future generations as some of the most valuable land we have.

I am asking you to stop all dealings in this property. Please do not consolidate it, please do not migrate it to the new land titles system, and please do not make commitments that might expose the Town to liability for the developer's costs and fees.

Simply, please put a hold on dealing with the old school property until there has been full consultation about its future, and a new planning strategy and land use bylaw have been put in place.

3. Priorities – the Environment, our Economy, Children and Elders

There is a great deal of genuine concern about the future of this Town. One of the ways that this development has been presented is in a black and white ultimatum – have this development or lose the Town.

I do not like being frightened into doing something that I think is wrong. I prefer to build, rather, on our strengths. I believe that strength will come through active engagement of our community around its ongoing needs and future direction.

I also believe we have no choice but to deal with our realities. The realities can be grouped under three headings. They are environmental issues, economic development issues, and social justice issues.

(a) The Environment

The immediate environmental issue will be taken care of for the time being by putting any further dealing with the property on hold. However, the Town's future cannot be separated from the environment, and difficult municipal policy decisions have to be made in this area.

Environmental concerns now rank first amongst most citizens of the western world. The protection of woodlands as part of our response to increasing carbon emissions is endorsed in forums at almost every meeting of global governments. Watershed protection is enshrined in a myriad of permits and by-laws from coast to coast in Canada. Closer to home, next week in Mahone Bay the Mahone Bay Centre will host students at Bayview School who will give a heartfelt public presentation on "ecological footprints."

The principles of sustainable development should be integrated into the Town's vision for its future, and be built into its economic policies, planning strategy, land use by-law and development agreements. We have been in contact with Genuine Progress Index (GPI) Atlantic to see what would be involved in obtaining a GPI assessment of the economic value of the non-market social and environmental values of the old school property. They are booked until the fall but they are willing to do a presentation to encourage Councilors and residents to examine the issues from a GPI perspective.

(b) The Economy

On the economic front, I believe we need a lot of information and research. Public policy on the economic future of Mahone Bay concerns us all and we need good, objective, information for the public debate on the economic issues. Please do not mistake a developer's pitch for good economic policy.

Let's tap the creative resources in this Town. I am hearing a lot of exciting suggestions.

I suggest a small, modest, and immediate start. I suggest that Council consult young families who have recently moved to Town about their motivations, needs and aspirations in making a move that we all see as so vitally important to our future. I suggest that the consultation should be interactive - not just a paper questionnaire or survey - and the results should be made public while respecting the need for personal privacy.

On the social justice front I am suggesting two immediate priorities.

(c) Our Children

For our children, I suggest you call for proposals for the preservation of the soccer field as a multi-use playing field, with access to and from the Mahone Bay Centre, and for use as a village green. I also suggest that you give a reasonable time to those who are concerned about the field to put together proposals – the length of time should be discussed with them.

I also ask that over this current soccer season the Town consult those involved in soccer and who come to our Town – the players, the coaches and the parents - to find out just how many indirect economic benefits they bring with them – whether it is at the Tim Horton's or the Pharmacy or use of the Town Pool – and to find out what this playing field means to our Town and the region we serve and depend on.

(d) Our Elders

I am also requesting you to do two things for those of our elders who have special needs. A number of my neighbours are elders and they have concerns that we must consider. I am not suggesting that you have not considered the needs of our elders. We agree that there are pressing needs to be considered.

My first suggestion is that you meet with the elders of this Town and their representatives or representative institutions – like the Interfaith Committee of Ministers – to find out how many elders (other than those in the nursing home) have special needs that can be addressed or met through special-needs housing. It is also important to know how they see these needs being met. Their needs might be met in any of a number of creative ways – private or public or not for profit ways - without having to build a large apartment complex. It is also important to know what resources seniors with special needs may or may not be able to contribute.

My second suggestion is that the Town identify lots or parcels of land (other than the Old School Property), whether publicly or privately owned, that are currently accessible to, or on, Town services and that might be appropriate for use or development as special-needs housing for our elders. This information should also be made publicly available while respecting confidentiality.

I worry terribly that the Town may have mistaken a persuasive promotional pitch from a developer (who wants to profit from serving an aging population) for coherent public policy to meet the real needs of the elderly citizens who live in this Town and who have made such a commitment to it.

Conclusion

I look forward to your positive responses to my suggestions. They are made from a heartfelt concern for our future together. It is a future that will be arrived at through consensus after inclusive and responsive public consultations about the use of public land and the needs and priorities of the Town as it moves ahead into its unique future.

I look forward to seeing you all at the citizens meeting.