

Taking Care of Business

SOUTHERN GULF ISLANDS HAVE UNIQUE STYLE THROUGH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

By CHERIE THIESSEN

Photos by Cherie Thiessen, except as noted

You've decided on a trip to one of the Gulf Islands on a whim. You didn't book anything; you forgot to pick up a map from the ferry; you're not sure what there is to see or do; and you're starving. Oh look, there's an information booth! Long live our Chambers of Commerce (COC), the ambassadors of our islands. They greet visitors, they answer questions and hand out useful information. They maintain active websites and Facebook pages featuring photos, events, attractions and news. They produce useful maps and brochures and make them available on the ferries, and they direct people to the right places.

You're contemplating moving to one of the islands to set up your business and to make a go of it for yourself and your family in a safer, slower, rural community. Where to turn for all the answers to your questions? Who to ask for details about insurance, demographics and services? Who has the insider info and is willing to share it? COCs to the rescue once again.

While the history of the province's Boards of Trade and COCs stretches back to the 1800s with some, such as the one in Greater Victoria, pre-dating even Canada's Confederation, the creation of a provincial Chamber to drive business and economic policy

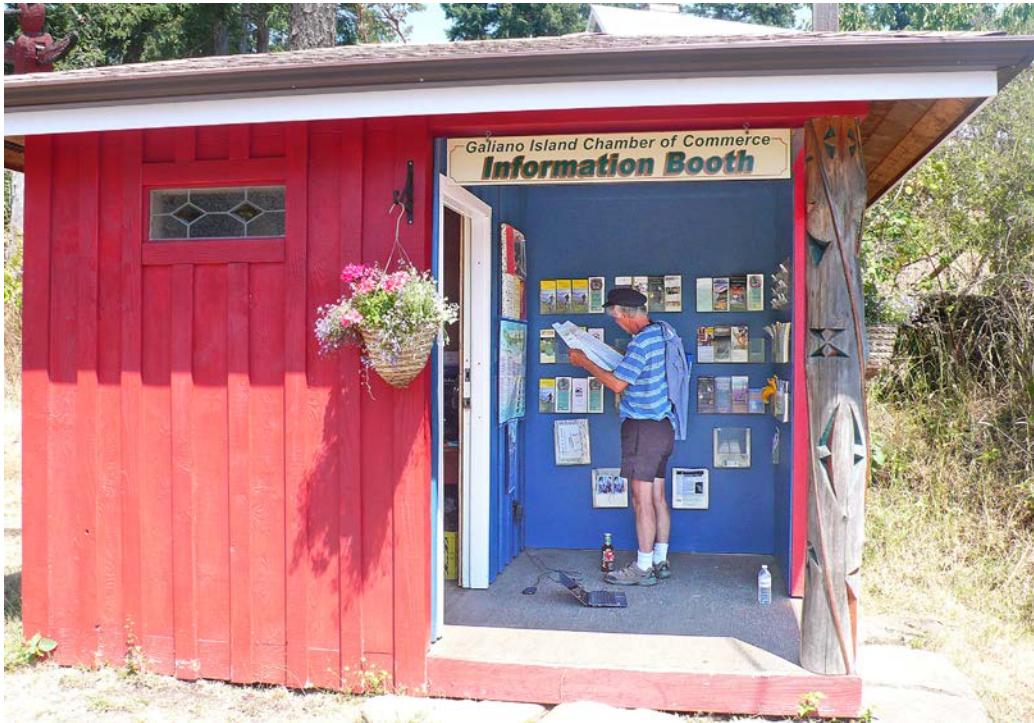


Above: Mamie Hutt-Temoana, right, shares info with visitors at the Pender Chamber of Commerce tourist information kiosk in Driftwood Centre.

Below: Mayne Island Community Chamber of Commerce members meet with Dave Petryk, president and CEO of Tourism Vancouver Island in September. From left is Petryk, Carmen Pearson, Richard Jarco, River Judd, Bill McCance, Millie Leathers, Andy Pearson and Sharon Hinton.



TOBY SNELGROVE PHOTO



Galiano Island's visitor information booth in Sturdies Bay, operated by the Chamber of Commerce.

in British Columbia did not happen until 1951, when 85 delegates met at the Hotel Vancouver to form the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, the umbrella group under which all local chambers “shelter.” By 1959 the Pender Islands had joined, when a resident group of Penderites came together to assist each other and help promote the island.

PENDER ISLANDS

“We’re here for the Pender businesses,” asserts an enthusiastic Mamie Hutt-Temoana, the interim president for the Pender Island COC. “It’s not just about tourism. We also want to help local businesses grow.”

Recently arrived on the island, she and her partner will soon be opening their South Pender B&B. While the Penders boast an impressive 95 members, Hutt-Temoana wants more. “There are a lot of smaller businesses that haven’t joined. We need to show them how they can benefit.” She eyes me with a penetrating look. “Like writers, for example. Have you considered being a member?”

AND ON SALT SPRING ISLAND

The Salt Spring Island Chamber of Commerce, a non-profit organization, supports members through education, advocacy and networking activities with the goal of creating a vibrant economic climate for the business community on Salt Spring Island. The volunteer board of directors are Li Read, Matt Steffich, Genevieve Price, Fred Lizotte, Murray Nurse, Kate Fischer, Linda Bradford, Peter Vincent, John Cade, Jeremy Milsom, Teile McDonald, Greg Clayton and Ken Marr.

The Chamber is working on an array of new and ongoing ventures:

- › In June 2014, the Chamber released its first video promoting Salt Spring Island. “Discover Yourself Here” can be viewed on YouTube or at www.saltspringtourism.com
- › The Chamber is a key participant and promoter in the completion of the Ganges Boardwalk project.
- › Annual Chamber events include the successful Sip & Savour Salt Spring, Canada Day celebrations and Salt Spring Blooms in April.
- › The Chamber-sponsored “Shop Local” program kicked off in October to promote support of community, jobs and the envi-



From left, Ron Pither of West Coast Islands Conservancy, Elizabeth FitzZaland of the Agricultural Alliance, Chamber executive director Janet Clouston and Chamber president Li Read at the 2014 Salt Spring Business Awards gala. Pither and FitzZaland accepted donations for their groups from Sip & Savour Salt Spring proceeds. (Jen MacLellan photo)

ronment through shopping locally.

› In 2014 the Ganges Visitors Centre welcomed over 33,000 guests from every corner of the world. The Visitors Centre will again have its Christmas makeover both inside and out this season. We will be open 11a.m. to 3 p.m. every day except Dec. 25, 26 and Jan. 1.

› Christmas on Salt Spring is a Chamber-supported event running Nov. 29 through

New Year’s Day, featuring Light-Up and Chili Contest, craft fairs, great concerts and the famous Glowtini Contest in support of Copper Kettle.

› There is a new emphasis on supporting small business at the Chamber of Commerce through the Business Resource and Referral Centre. Feel free to drop in to learn what services can be provided.

› In 2015, look for the Chamber-sponsored Wellness Weekend, where Salt Spring will be transformed into an island-wide rejuvenating experience by its many health, wellness and spirituality providers.

The Chamber invites new members to become involved

in its many initiatives. People are encouraged to join now during a special promotion to receive welcome gifts and be entered to win great prizes.

To learn more about the Chamber of Commerce, call 250-537-4223 or visit www.saltspringchamber.com

“WHAT NEEDS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IS THAT EACH ISLAND HAS A SMALL BUSINESS COMMUNITY THAT CAN DO ONLY SO MUCH, BUT TOGETHER WE CAN DO SO MUCH MORE.”

— BRIAN DEARDEN, MAYNE ISLAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The interim president talks about initiatives the COC is working on, like open houses when a new business starts up, building immediate connections between entrepreneurs, islanders and other businesses, and introducing business owners to one another in “meet and greets,” where brainstorming, mentoring and idea exchanges can take place. Issues like promoting buying locally, better COC signage, focused training events, a more active Facebook presence, an online web newsletter and more publicity support for local businesses are also on the table.

Working closely with the other Gulf Islands and supporting initiatives like Experience the Gulf Islands (www.sustainableislands.ca), which promotes the arts, cycling and pedestrian trails, encourages the sharing of agriculture and food strategies and much more, this COC seems to be aiming for closer ties among islands, helping its own while looking outward as well.

SATURNA ISLAND

While Saturna may not have a COC, it does have the Saturna Island Tourism Association with 30 members, not bad at all for an island of only 350 people.

The association meets twice a year to brainstorm, plan new flyers, and discuss ways to support one another and encourage tourism. Secretary Laura Swan, Saturna Lodge’s co-owner, is a dynamic addition to the group. A Canadian who spent 20 years in the U.S. in the fast-moving technology field, she and her partner have transformed and renovated the historic lodge and reintroduced a restaurant (in season) in hardly over a year.

“Owning and operating the Saturna Lodge has been a new adventure for us, but we have found such positive synergy amongst the different Saturna businesses from which we are all reaping the rewards,” Swan says.

As with the other island COCs, she sees ways in which each could work together for the benefit of all.

“As the Saturna Island Tourism Association gains strength, we’re going to be continuing to explore ways we can work more closely with other similar Gulf Islands associations.” One of these ways, she explains, is by going further to recruit businesses from the Penders, Galiano and Mayne that are providing services unavailable on Saturna.

MAYNE ISLAND

“When Mary and I started Fernhill Lodge in 1983, we needed insurance and a way of processing credit cards.” Long-time Mayne Islander and thespian Brian Crumblehulme thinks back to the COC’s early days.

“We discovered that rates were way cheaper if we were members of a business association, so we went ahead and formed one. Initially there were eight of us. A year later, we decided we needed to organize as a proper association and so we became the Mayne Island Community Chamber of Commerce in 1985. Bill Messer was the first president and I subsequently was the next.”

These days it's Millie Leathers at the helm. She took over from Brian Dearden in May and the active membership has climbed to 61, with a 10-person board, pretty impressive given the fact that Mayne's population just nudges 1,000.

When I ask Leathers about some of the COC's challenges, she doesn't hesitate: “We hold general meetings, sometimes with speakers, about four times a year, and monthly meetings, but getting the members out to meetings is always a challenge, unless we feed them. Our spaghetti dinner meeting is always overflowing.”

Getting members out to meetings has always been a Gulf Islands challenge, so is there a lesson here? Does it come with red wine, I wonder?

Maintaining a lively presence at their fall fair, the annual car show, the weekend farmers markets in the summer and the Christmas bonfire, COC members seem to have fun keeping busy. They promote musical and theatrical events, outings, art shows, member events and openings on island, on their excellent website (overseen by member Richard De Armond) and on their lively Facebook pages. The Chamber also puts together brochures and print ads, with the welcome assistance of provincial grant monies.

Dearden, who is still active with the COC as a director, says he and the board are excited about the Experience the Gulf Islands initiative that is being spearheaded by the Capital Regional District. “It will bring the islands together from a marketing perspective. We are also working with Michael Dunn (a Mayne Islander) to get behind the Nature and Arts Festival this spring and think it will be a terrific event.” What makes this event special is that Dunn is reaching out to the other islands to make it a cooperative venture.

Dearden also adds: “What needs to be understood is that each island has a small business community that can do only so much, but together we can do so much more.”

GALIANO ISLAND

One wonders how Galiano Inn's busy co-owner can find the time to head up the local COC, but Conny Nordin has been doing that and a whole lot more in the 14 years since buying the property and the four years since she has been president.

“We have several goals. The first is to make Galiano, and by extension the Gulf Islands, 'the place' for visitors to come year round, especially in the 'secret season.' We do this through supporting many Galiano happenings, helping to turn them into iconic island events, like the Literary Festival, Canada Day celebrations, Fiesta Days and, more recently, October's Blackberry Festival. Secondly, Galiano used to be quite fractious and I believe we have changed that around dramatically in the last few years. Getting people who are supportive of the environment to also be supportive of businesses is part of that, because without a viable, vibrant business community, we can't support the services and environmental initiatives we all need.”

With just over 1,000 residents, Galiano takes business seriously; it has an impressive 100 members who meet monthly and, like the Penders, formed its COC in the 1950s.



Conny Nordin, co-owner of Galiano Inn and the president of the island's Chamber of Commerce, provides assistance to a visitor.

The third goal, says Nordin, is tied in with the island's main challenge: the cutting of services and raising of fares by B.C. Ferries, with the resulting drop in tourism.

“So we encourage residents to buy local and promote the idea throughout the island. Our last goal is to work with the other islands to create a gateway to the islands for visitors and island hopping. Salt Spring did a fabulous job of building on summer ferry schedules to bring Salt Spring Islanders to Galiano and Mayne for the day. They encourage visitors to come and stay on Salt Spring but visit the other islands during the day and they've been extremely generous in letting Salt Spring Islanders know that the other islands are a great destination.”

COC members are justly proud of the fact that it was their very own Ed Andrusiak who was the lead person in the movement all of the islands are so excited about, Experience the Gulf Islands.

“He was the one who had the idea and then the CRD contact from Pender, David Howe, got behind it and obtained funding and support for it. It was a Galiano Island original idea that is now being embraced by the other islands.” Now that's working together!

Like our bodies, we take our COCs for granted. We don't really pay attention to them unless things stop running smoothly. And yet they improve the quality of our island life so much. They encourage and support the services and events we take for granted while showcasing our islands to the rest of the world. So next time you celebrate at Hope Bay's Boat Days or Mayne's Christmas bonfire, or Galiano's thriving February Literary Festival, thank your COC. ✨

SOUTHERN GULF ISLANDS CONNECTIONS

The Penders > www.penderislandchamber.com (Kiosk at the Driftwood Centre.)

Mayne Island > www.mayneislandchamber.ca
(Information can be obtained at the REMAX office near the Village Bay ferry terminal.)

Galiano Island > www.galianoisland.com
(Small office and booth in Sturdies Bay near the ferry, staffed in summers.)

Saturna Island Tourism Association > www.saturnatourism.com
(Info available on ferry, Saturna General Store and Saturna Lodge.)