

Here be Dragons...

That's what early cartographers wrote on their illustrated maps, when drawing parts of the world that were uncharted territory. It was a way of filling in the blanks, and a very human response to the unknown. We all do it occasionally, usually in minor ways, avoiding moving in new directions because we're afraid the new won't be as good/comfortable/easy/manageable as what we're used to. Until something forces the issue, and mostly, we cope and adapt and eventually the new uncharted territory is the new "known" – the new comfort zone. But getting there takes working things through.

There are a lot of steps we could be taking to secure our future here on Thetis. Some are underway, like the brave venture to buy part of Burchell Hill (Fairyslipper Forest) for preservation, and there's an update on that effort on page 12. There's the occasional discussion (and this has been going on in a desultory fashion for years) about some kind of retirement or elder accommodation on Thetis, so our older residents aren't forced to move off island when they'd rather stay, but they find the upkeep of a home in this self-sufficient community is getting past them. There are a lot of ways we could make that happen, and good models are developing on other Gulf islands, as well as other parts of the world. I hope we can pull it off, because selfishly, I'd like to stay.

But only under certain circumstances. There's a set of decisions coming up (see the lead article on page 3) that are more imminent than these laudable possibilities, and if we take what turns out to be a wrong direction on these decisions, the rest of the possibilities fade back into might-have-beens. The Fire Department has, for many years, been subject to ever increasing requirements from government regulatory agencies. The work load has increased, but the truly wonderful people who give their time and expertise to that organization have kept up with it, and have continued to provide what is in my opinion the single most important service on Thetis. Without the fire fighters and first responders (and that means a fire and first responder service that corresponds to the provincial requirements), life here would be a great deal more problematic. And in more immediate terms, a lot more expensive. Just in terms of fire insurance, IF we could still get it, the cost would more than double. And home values would sink, as the number of people prepared to buy into an area with no or inadequate fire protection or first responder service is small indeed.

But to my mind there's more than just the gradually increasing cost of keeping up with the regulations. There's the ever increasing demand of time on those members of the community with the skills and dedication to keep it going. We are used to a huge amount of service and amenity provided by volunteers, and that's an important part of what makes this such a fabulous place to live – not just that those services are there, but that most of us chip in to do part of it, so the larger benefit is shared. But there comes a tipping point, and I believe we passed it some years ago. The senior members of the Fire Department, most particularly the Chief, are not doing a part-time, volunteer job. It's a full-time, on call 24/7 commitment with few breaks and virtually no compensation. This is fine if you have independently wealthy individuals with the necessary skills who are prepared to give up their lives to this cause, but we don't. The people who are doing it are not the wealthy. A few are retired and not dependent on making a living at this stage in their lives, and we are incredibly lucky to have them. But most members of the department are giving up part or all of their "working" years to our benefit, and we need to find a way to compensate for this. Not pay equity with other professional fire departments – we haven't the population for it – but contributing to a living. There are ways of doing this that wouldn't be an extraordinary burden. I can't conceive of how this wouldn't be the right thing to do.

And if you don't agree with how the Department manages the risks and demands, join it! See from the inside where the requirements are coming from. Then if you have a better idea, it'll be adopted. Or you'll see more of the picture than you did before, and appreciate it more. A win-win.

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