

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: October 26, 2022

Shore Access on Gabriola

A recent accident in which a person fell while attempting to access the beach from the trail near the cemetery provides a timely opportunity to discuss the existence and use of public road allowances and shore accesses on Gabriola Island.

Undeveloped rights-of-way (unbuilt roads) and shore accesses are Provincial Crown land managed by the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. MoTI does not develop these ROW's for non-vehicular use, but all members of the public are free to use them in the same way as they are free to go onto any other public road. Informal trails have appeared on many of them through years of community use.

Gabriola Land and Trails Trust (GaLTT) has improved some of the existing trails and built others to provide important connections between neighbourhoods, to link adjacent trail networks, and to assist public access to the shoreline.

There are approximately 100 public shore accesses on Gabriola. However, much of the island's foreshore is steep and/or unstable, so development of many of them is impractical. GaLTT has installed yellow concrete blocks to mark the location of established trails where public access to the shoreline is possible.

As a non-profit, volunteer-run organization, GaLTT does not have the authority or the financial resources to construct and maintain major infrastructure improvements (e.g., stairs, railings) on MoTI shore accesses, nor are we able to accept the associated liability risk. Fortunately, the RDN has assumed responsibility for a few shore accesses at popular locations on Gabriola (e.g., Decourcy peninsula, Spring Beach) and has installed robust infrastructure under formal licensing agreement with MoTI. GaLTT has advocated for much of this work and will continue to advocate for improved shore access at other appropriate locations.

The Gabriola Cemetery shore access (GI-40) is an excellent case in point. GaLTT received a complaint about the state of that access several months ago and followed up with a site inspection and then initiated a preliminary discussion with the RDN about them potentially assuming formal responsibility for it, including the installation of appropriate infrastructure improvements. However, the need for stairs and/or handrails at this location is complicated by high tides and winter storms which erode the shoreline and would likely cause damage to stairs or handrails. Also, easy access to the beach is often blocked by logs. Unfortunately, there are likely no easy solutions at this location, but GaLTT will continue to explore viable options.

GaLTT receives many requests for trail improvements or improved shore access. Our trail work is undertaken by volunteers, and what we can accomplish is largely determined by the amount of funding provided by the small number of trail users who choose to support GaLTT through memberships and donations. We do our best to respond to reports about blocked trails or unsafe conditions as quickly as possible.

Any Gabriola resident may also direct requests for specific trail or access improvements to the Parks and Open Spaces Advisory Committee (POSAC) for Electoral Area B or to BC Parks (for improved trail and shore access in provincial parks).

Finally, GaLTT believes people's appreciation of the natural world increases when they are given opportunities to explore and connect with it. Building and maintaining public trails is an important part of our mandate. However, any outdoor activity has inherent risks, and trail users should always exercise caution.

Rob Brockley
President, Gabriola Land and Trails Trust