

More on the Eco Depot

When the HST referendum was put to the people of BC, Premier Campbell promised that he would treat the result as binding. The referendum addressed all the people of the province because everyone has a direct stake in the level of taxation that is imposed on the citizens of the province. The result indicated a public distaste for inequity on whom the tax would fall and unilateral imposition by those in power. When the Kerry Park referendum was held, all citizens of the region that stood to be taxed had the same issue at stake, a choice between infrastructure facility and taxation to pay for it, but not its location. The Eco-Depot referendum is only about a facility location, not about the concept of the depot or the correctness of recycling as a civic responsibility, or about the advisability of replacing private sector operations, or even about the ultimate tax cost to residents all of which are much more important issues than location and valid subjects for a binding referendum.

The situation that people in the Cameron-Taggart area face is one of inequity and imposition. In what amounts to an opinion poll, for that is what a non-binding referendum actual is, a large number of people with little at stake beyond convenience are being asked to vote yes or no to creating a major imposition on a group of their fellow citizens. This imbalance is not good democracy, it is a perversion of an otherwise useful democratic mechanism to "clear a path" for a locally unpopular decision. This is a ploy that is frequently used in "clearances" of this type where development has widely disproportionate impacts on the people asked to vote. If we cast the voting net wide enough it is possible to bury local opposition with the larger numbers of those with much less at stake. What characterizes the eco-depot disagreements so clearly to me is that they are monumentally unfair to a group of our fellow citizens. Holding a non-binding referendum in which the Regional District retains the option to ignore a no result or to impose a yes result on a significant number of our neighbours is simply not democracy, it is a mistaken interpretation of democracy that is only useful to those in power who have made a bad decision that they now feel obliged to defend.

I hear some people say how annoyed they are with the statements and protests of the Cameron-Taggart residents. I would have to ask each of them how they would react in the same circumstances. How would they deal with the inequity and imbalance of having to protest against their own local government, using their own funds, time and effort while their elected officials use tax funds, professional staff time and expensive consultants to overwhelm their objections. This is about fair play and it is wrong to cast it as an open and shut exercise in democracy when it is simplistically based on a yes/no vote in an opinion poll about a location option. The voting public does not even know what other options there might have been or could still be for location of a recycling facility that the Regional District considered or might consider as alternatives. Surely we are not in a situation where the Cameron-Taggart location is "all or nothing" and the Regional District has not said as much. What is being so adamantly defended is a wrong location with negative consequences for trust in fair play. A non-binding referendum on a set of optional locations would be a valid use of such an opinion gathering device and could be supported by objective information from government. A binding referendum on tax cost of construction and operation would be a valid use of such a decision making device that could also be supported by objective information from government.