

Mack Laing Heritage Society of the Comox Valley

White Paper

In 1973, Mack Laing deeded his property - what is now Mack Laing Park and Shakesides house (the "Property"), to the Town of Comox, with conditions.

Among those conditions was that the property be used as a public nature park and be *"left to the greatest extent possible in its natural state"*. and that *"any buildings be restricted to the comfort and convenience of members of the public"*. These statements are excerpts from the legal documents. The Property is an inherent part of the Trust.

Mack Laing's Will further suggests that the Property be converted into a "natural history museum".

The Mack Laing Nature House Advisory Committee was appointed by Comox Council to *"evaluate the potential of converting (the Property) into a natural history museum"* and *"identify available funding opportunities to leverage the Mack Laing Trust Fund to fulfill the wishes of the Will"*.

Money appears to be the overriding concern of certain members of this committee. Mack Laing left the Town of Comox \$45,000 to be put in trust for the creation and maintenance of a natural history museum. However, instead of doing so, the Town put the money into general revenue, where it accumulated little interest. It then rented out the Property, in direct violation of the legal agreement, because this prevented the house from being used by the public.

The first tenant of the Property has stated he paid \$375 per month, or \$4,500 per year. The "pro forma" accounting grossly understates this revenue. Later tenants paid \$475 per month, or \$5,700 per year. This amount appears nowhere in the accounting. Assuming an average rental income of \$5,000 per year, the Town received about \$150,000 over 30 years, exclusive of interest.

The Town received plenty of money, from the Trust and rental of the Property, to initiate the conversion of the Property into a modest natural history museum,

nature interpretive centre, or any other similar purpose, pursuant to the Will. It would generate income, be self-supporting and could be run largely by volunteers. It would attract naturalists from across the country, since Mack Laing was a person of considerable influence and historical importance to Canada. It could also be used by artists, writers, and as a destination for nature hikers, as per the Sybil Andrews Cottage model in Campbell River.

This committee has thus far failed to adequately consider the "potential" of the Property as a natural history museum, nor has this potential been "evaluated", as stated in the first of this committee's Terms of Reference. Instead, this committee has focused on obstacles, such as the cost of conversion, and ignored the negligence and disrespect shown the Property and Mack Laing's wishes over the past 33 years.

Money is not the issue. If the Town removes the demolition order from the Property and shows a willingness to create a place where people can appreciate both Mack Laing and the Park - in the historic house he built - funding will be found to leverage the Trust funds from organizations such as Heritage BC and the National Trust of Canada, among others. Ongoing expenses can be met by fundraisers and grants from community organizations, if a group such as the MLHS is engaged to participate.

However, if this committee decides that the Property should be removed or demolished, the Mack Laing Heritage Society will have no choice but to disown this committee and Comox Council for lack of credibility.

MLHS has received advice from legal professionals familiar with these issues and hopes that the Town will evaluate the situation and act in a reasonable manner.

The Town of Comox will have to account to all Canadians for their heritage stewardship.

Citizens want to see Shakesides returned to public use, as per the Will. The Property is an integral part of the Mack Laing Park experience. It belongs to the Trust and is not ours to remove.