

*NOTES FOR A PRESENTATION TO THE RDN COUNCIL, RE: FUNDING THE
REHABILITATION OF MORDEN COLLIERY HISTORIC PROVINCIAL PARK*

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Good evening and thank you for placing us on your agenda for this meeting. I would like to first introduce my colleagues who are with me here tonight to assist with this presentation. First, John Hofman, a semi-retired professional engineer who is also a co-president and long-time member of our society. John will be able to field any questions you may have about RJC's recently completed engineering study and any of the other engineering studies – there have been 5 altogether – that have been completed over the past 11 years. And secondly, Chris Sholberg, fairly new to our board of directors but a long-time member and well-known in the Nanaimo community as the City's heritage planner. Chris is our expert on the various infrastructure programmes that are available. Other board members here tonight include Louise Shuker, our treasurer, and David Dunaway, one of our directors.

My presentation is in two parts. I will first address the “why we should and do care” question, and secondly, I will describe briefly the situation that has led to this presentation and our recommendation, which has been circulated to you and calls for the RDN to mount an application for infrastructure funding – an application, I should point out, that does not require any upfront financial contribution from the RDN.

I will assume that directors have read the background material previously circulated, including my detailed e-mail of February 19th and the attached background documents dealing with FOMM's efforts to date (which are attached again for your benefit): namely, the funding proposal we first presented to the RDN Regional Parks and Trails Select Committee earlier this month, and a copy of RJC's engineering study, completed in December of last year. But even if you haven't had a chance to read or perhaps digest all that information – which would be completely understandable given the range of your obligations – please feel free to advance whatever questions come to mind at the end of this presentation.

So, to begin:

Apart, perhaps, from the famous Bastion that graces Nanaimo's waterfront, is there a more powerful symbol of this region's first 150 years of European settlement than Morden Mine? Morden is all we have left of any consequence that speaks to the industry that dominated the east coast of Vancouver Island for the better part of 100 years. In its faded glory, it stands as an appreciative reminder of a time when coal mines and many related industries and businesses thoroughly dominated the local landscape. Coal's contribution to our present is as important as it is now somewhat obscure, for the many mines, related service industries, coal wharves, and miners' houses have largely disappeared – or receded into a fuzzy background.

And yet it is clear that our coal mining heritage remains important to people. Just the other day Nanaimo's poet laureate, Naomi Wakan, offered an approving comment on a poem entitled "Coal Dust" by local author Lisa Webster-Gibson, which she included in her *Daily News* column, noting in passing that "like us, even the city itself must come to terms with its roots if it is to move forward." *

She's right, of course, and that is why travel writers, playwrights, documentary film-makers, biographers, historians, journalists and even hobbyists continue to write about coal's importance to our development and its lasting impact on community attitudes and values. Such noteworthy persons as the gifted writer Lynn Bowen, author of two celebrated and often cited books on Vancouver Island coal miners and coal mining, the popular historian and prodigious journalist Tom Paterson, the esteemed dean of Vancouver Island journalism, Jim Hume, and academics such as John Hine have, over the years, offered varying and compelling perspectives on the era when "coal was king."

And yet when tourists and interested newcomers to the area seek out evidence of this once dominant industry they are hard pressed to find much of anything, save a few kiosks, cairns, and museum displays. The real life and routine of coal-mining has virtually disappeared.

As Ms. Webster-Gibson suggests, the case for rehabilitating Morden addresses far more than tourism concerns, as important as these are for our local business community. Before addressing some of these other reasons for saving Morden, I would like to point out that even in its dilapidated state the mine site attracts visitors of all kinds, including tour groups from cruise ships and international delegations from places as diverse as Holland and Mongolia. These visits are now, however, just short stops on a larger itinerary, often without the benefit of informed tour leaders, and with little potential for spin-off economic benefits. A rehabilitated Morden Mine, equipped properly with a Vancouver Island Coal Mine Heritage Interpretation Centre and with the twin bridges located where Morden's railway trestles once stood, offers enormous tourism potential and plenty of benefits to the local economy, especially, perhaps, the hospitality sector in Cedar. It also would serve as the anchor point of a four-mile long regional trail which one day – if all goes according to the RDN's plans – will end at tidewater in Boat Harbour, where Morden's coal was once shipped to American and other markets.

Morden Mine, just as importantly, will trigger memories and serve to inform its visitors about the strange currents of history. As a memorial site – one of its intended original purposes – it will give the families of miners a place to come to terms with their own roots and the context in which those roots took hold. A properly conceived interpretation centre will have that as part of its mandate. A properly conceived interpretation centre will also address the fickle nature of history and how a mine built to last for decades came to an end within a few short years, a victim of changing times. It will also show how a mine as part of a grand vision may come to naught because of events completely unrelated to that vision: in Morden's case, dreams of a coal and steel empire in the old Anglo-Canadian tradition born of the fertile imagination of Grant Morden, a wealthy

Canadian financier who resided in London at the seat of Empire and associated with the likes of a more famous colleague, Max Aitken, known to us as Lord Beaverbrook, a great patron of Canadian art.

Grant Morden, who among other things rescued the famous Canada Steamship Line from oblivion and organized the first version of a Canadian Air Force during World War I, was a fascinating entrepreneurial giant who could not have seen that war was coming or that it would have the impact it had on Morden Mine and the other coal mines his company owned and operated on Vancouver Island. Grant Morden lost his fortune in the Great Crash of 1929 and died a broken man in 1932, not yet 55 years of age.

Morden Mine honours the memory of Grant Morden and those who built it as much as it honours all miners and all those involved in the development of the Vancouver Island coal mine industry – warts and all, and there were many warts, as some of you will no doubt realize.

So Morden Mine matters.

George Wilkinson, a prominent Vancouver businessman and son of a former Inspector of Mines for the province, thought it mattered. He happened to drive by the site one day in the late 1960s and even then realized that it was the last standing evidence of Vancouver Island's once mighty coal mining industry. With a quickness that amazes in today's complex world, he chatted up his friends in the Social Credit government of the day, offering to purchase the mine site and the railway right-of-way and donate both to the Province as a park. Instead, the Province acquired the site itself for \$10,000 – which oddly enough was also the cost of building the headframe and tibble back in 1913 – as well as most of the right-of-way and by 1972 Morden Colliery had become a Class A provincial park, a tribute to Mr. Wilkinson's acumen and foresight.

But then neglect took over and until 2003 Morden, for reasons difficult to discover let alone fathom, was all but forgotten. It was re-discovered, if you will, by a woman named Judy Burgess, who was instrumental in forming our society and awakening both the government and our local community to Morden's enormous potential.

Until the summer of 2013, it's fair to say that BC Parks and the provincial government were working closely with our society to plan a future for Morden. The government had been a party to or in some cases had itself sponsored some of the four engineering studies and one site plan study that preceded RJC's study of 2014. But a new minister brought a new attitude and unfortunately for Morden, the attitude became "do it yourself" – and do it yourself not because money was in short supply but because the new course of action was to spend taxpayers' money – even millions of dollars of new money injected into the park system – somewhere else.

And that brings us to the present moment. The RJC study, in which the government refused to participate, at last specifies for us what must be done to save Morden and how much it will cost. Action, it states, is required "immediately," because there are too many

variables involved to give its report a long shelf life and conditions at Morden could change at any time.

Along with the RJC report, the Site Plan study of 2010, to which the City, the RDN, the Province as well as FOMM contributed equally, specifies what needs to be done to improve the site and how much it will cost.

Finally, the idea of an interpretation centre, first conceived and articulated to former minister Terry Lake when we met with him in 2012, has become a part of our plan and was artistically rendered for the benefit of Minister Lake by my colleague John Hofman, as you will see on the slide now on the screen. What's different from his conception is our new conception for rehabilitating the tipple at Morden. RJC has recommended that the tipple be re-roofed and re-cladded, as you will see in the two historic slides now being shown. A re-clad and re-roofed tipple will not only give the mine a more authentic look, it will also minimize maintenance costs and protect that part of the structure from further erosion.

Morden has been effectively "orphaned" by BC Parks and by the current Minister of the Environment – put in limbo status where it will remain un-repaired until some far off day when, it is imagined, someone will accept it as a "divestment." BC Parks knows that this is not realistic thinking: it's more like classic avoidance behaviour.

Nevertheless, it is current policy. It will not be easily changed and any such change will be too late for the significant funding that is required and available only in the short run through the federal government's current infrastructure programme. The application deadline date to seek funding under that programme is April 15th, just a few short weeks away. If an application isn't mounted it is exceedingly unlikely there will be another day. There simply is no other source of funding that we are aware of that will address a repair job of this magnitude. It certainly was not our original wish or intention, but the reality now is that Morden can only be saved if the RDN embraces it as a project and seeks to fund it through the infrastructure programme.

You will note that in the Status Report, circulated at the outset of this meeting by Chris, we are recommending that the Morden project be folded in with the bridge project as one of three components of a larger project: first, site repairs and site landscaping improvements; second, the bridges over the Nanaimo River; and third, the interpretation centre. All in all an ambitious, multi-million dollar project.

There are three fundamental reasons for recommending this approach.

First, we believe it's important to think big. A grandly-conceived project will attract interest. Last year at about this time when we took *Daily News* publisher Hugh Nicholson and his managing editor, Mark MacDonald, on a tour of the site, Hugh was immediately attracted to the grander vision and noted that he had been deeply involved with bringing almost a quarter of a billion dollars in infrastructure funding to Prince George back in 2009. Just today I received an e-mail message from him offering his full

support for this project and his assistance in ushering it along. While he resided in Nanaimo, Hugh was a great supporter of Morden and did much to facilitate community awareness of the park's potential. It's great to know that he remains interested and is willing to be helpful, even though he's relocated to the east. Mark, too, remains interested, and as Conservative Party candidate in the federal riding in which Morden sits, has a keen interest in seeing this project become a reality.

Second, we think bundling the three projects helps all three. The bridges make more sense when linked to an attractive destination. Conversely, restoration of the mine and development of an interpretation centre make more sense when paired with an attractive and fairly short walk from Cedar that includes two spectacular foot bridges over the Nanaimo River.

And third, we believe bundling the three projects helps protect what needs to be done in the immediate future. If the federal government imposes an across-the-board percentage cut on infrastructure grant applications – which seems likely to us given the government's deteriorating financial situation – it will be possible to put off the interpretation centre for another day. It's the tippie repair work and the bridges that commend themselves as the first order of business.

I have exhausted the time available and so did not get to mention examples of how much heritage sites and their interpretive facilities, both on and off Vancouver Island, are doing for tourism and education. The short answer is that many do well at attracting and educating visitors as well as contributing substantially to local economies.

Thank you for your time and attention. We welcome any questions you may have and we will do our best to supply appropriate answers.

*see Naomi Wakan, "Poetry Pick for February," *Nanaimo Daily News*, February 19th, 2015