

The Importance of the Bowen Island Lodge Covenant

In 1963, the Bowen Island Lodge (formerly the Bowen Lodge by the Sea) was opened by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB). The goal of the facility was for use as a recreational retreat for blind and visually impaired individuals in the summer and for use as a training centre for newly blinded persons in the winter.

Throughout the years, the programs offered at the facility underwent many revisions and grew tremendously. Programs were established for various age groups and included instruction in many diverse topics, such as independent living skills, technology, recreation, music and Braille literacy.

In 2002, a covenant governing the lands and facility that is the Bowen Island Lodge was put in place by the Bowen Island Municipality that protects the residential nature of Snug Point and ensures blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind individuals have access to a facility for recreation, meeting, and training. The covenant, which was signed by CNIB and the Bowen Island municipality and which also applies to their respective successors, was designed to restrict the use of the lands and facility in keeping with the residential nature of Snug Point by designating the principal use of the Bowen Island Lodge as "recreation, training and meeting facilities related to the care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities..." (Covenant P. 4), activities that do not typically disrupt the surrounding neighbourhood. Furthermore, the covenant places restrictions on the amount of accessory use events, events not considered part of the principal use, that can be held at the facility to ensure that the principal use group has access to the facility and to reduce the amount of noise and other issues typically associated with an event space and resort. When the covenant was instated, it created Canada's first and only legally protected recreation, meeting, and training facility for the blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind.

In 2009, CNIB announced its plans to replace its program offerings at the lodge with day camps at their Vancouver office. This move was met with much outrage from both the blind, visually impaired and deaf blind community and the local island community. After a community movement gained the support of several sponsors, CNIB relented and continued the more traditional format of the camps at the lodge.

In 2010, CNIB began the process of selling the Bowen Lodge by the Sea property. It announced that the 2010 camping season would be the last CNIB run camping program on Bowen Island.

In August of 2010, former campers of the original CNIB Camp Bowen project formed the Camp Bowen Working Group. The BC-based organization, now known as the Camp Bowen Society for the Visually Impaired, set out to fill the learning gap left by the closure of

CNIB's programs. In 2011, representatives of the society met with members of the Trethewey family, who had purchased the lodge earlier in the year. The Trethewey family was open to the idea of using the facility for events related to the blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind. They provided the society with greatly reduced pricing options for both accommodation and catering that made programs affordable to blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind individuals. During their tenure, the Trethewey family made every effort to ensure the society had desirable dates, including long weekends, something that contributed to the success of programs for the blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind.

Together with the BC visually impaired community, the society organized its first retreat at the lodge on Bowen Island in 2011. The retreat was considered to be a success by the board of directors and the campers who were in attendance. This was followed by annual program offerings that have been held at the lodge ever since.

In 2014, the Bowen Island Lodge partnered with the Camp Bowen Society for the Visually Impaired to host the Canadian Federation of the Blind's conference and convention.

In early 2016, the lodge changed hands once more. Under this new ownership it has been made very clear that they intend to run the facility primarily for accessory use groups. Repeated attempts to resolve issues of affordability, safety, and accessibility have met with very limited success. Efforts to meet with lodge management for resolution of concerns have so far resulted in two meetings where lodge management failed to be present. Organizers trying to set up programs for the principal use group at the lodge have been called a waste of time by lodge management and there have been other comments made that clearly demonstrate their attitude towards the principal use group. There is also no mention in their marketing of the principal use group, something that serves to reinforce their position.

The lodge, as it is currently operated, has too many issues regarding safety, accessibility, and affordability to be usable by blind, visually impaired and deaf blind individuals for meeting and recreation, let alone training.

Today, more than ever before, there is a need for a training and recreation centre for the blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind in Canada. The blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind community is currently in a state of crisis. There is an estimated 80% unemployment rate in the community and a large part of the solution to this problem is access to safe, accessible, affordable, and quality independent living skills training. At present, the Bowen Island Lodge is Canada's only legally designated training centre for the blind, visually impaired, and/or deaf blind.

The time has come for the facility to be restored to its intended purpose and help blind, visually impaired, and deaf blind Canadians become first class citizens in society. This can be accomplished by upholding the existing covenant and ensuring that the lodge's principal use group remains protected. Bringing in principal use groups as the primary occupants of the lands and/or facilities and keeping accessory use events as secondary would also serve to protect the residential nature of Snug Point.