

Investigations | Oct 7 2022

In this B.C. town, big money is bulldozing democracy

Powerful corporate interests are meddling in Squamish, leaving residents 'scared for the future' as elections near

by Cara McKenna

Support

The B.C. municipality of Squamish has become an “extreme example” of big-money meddling in small-town campaigns, as residents are being hit with a tsunami of manipulative online messages in advance of a critical election.

With one anonymous Facebook page formerly linked to right-wing group Canada Proud attacking councillors who voted against a proposed high-end housing development, and another website being backed by a major fracked gas project, locals are feeling frustrated as they head to the polls later this month in province-wide municipal elections.

According to an investigation by The Breach, the Pacific Energy-backed Woodfibre Liquid Natural Gas project was covertly behind the website

Squamish Forward. Launched last year, the site presented itself as a group of concerned residents trying to “advocate for a bigger and better Squamish.”

Meanwhile, Squamish Voices, another “community organization” with previous ties to Canada Proud, has now escalated its political attacks by making an anonymous and unsubstantiated sexual assault allegation against a mayoral candidate who has refused donations and meetings from developers. According to research by The Breach, the group has spent up to \$78,000 on Facebook ads alone since its founding last year and has also distributed flyers to homes across the district.

Another anonymous group called Squamish Now also appeared on the scene in September with political smears—including an ad denigrating candidates “backed by environmental groups”—on its Facebook page as well as flyers.

Surrounded by stunning mountain views and the sparkling waters of Howe Sound an hour’s drive north of Vancouver, Squamish, population 24,000, is one

of Canada's fastest-growing towns. A more pliant local council could potentially greenlight several proposed projects waiting on municipal approvals, including the years-deferred Woodfibre LNG facility now supported by **Enbridge**, the thrice-voted-down Cheema Lands housing **development** and the Aquilini family's long-delayed Garibaldi **resort**.

The councillors targeted by the various pop-up groups have each voted against, or expressed opposition to, some of these developments.

The highly-charged discourse driven by some of these sites is forcing those campaigning to respond to "the misinformation that has been put out there" rather than focus on the real issues, said Councillor Jenna Stoner, who is seeking re-election.

The rush of political advertising and commentary in Squamish comes as right-wing, business-backed networks have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to influence campaigns in Vancouver, and Canada Proud has been linked to astroturf groups masquerading as "grassroots" across the country.

"I don't think our small town community is ready for the amount of big money that is starting to meddle in our politics," said Stoner. "I think we are definitely an extreme example, and we are not the only ones."

Tracey Saxby, a Squamish resident for the last 21 years, co-founded the environmental group My Sea to Sky. She said she and other residents are deeply concerned about the influence of big money on the local political landscape.

My Sea to Sky has been campaigning against the fossil fuel industry in Squamish—focusing on the Woodfibre LNG project—largely because of the climate impacts. She said whereas there is usually civilized debate, this election cycle has felt very different, and the ramifications will “have major impacts for this community for decades to come.”

“What we need to ask is what is their end game? Who is it that they want elected to council? Who are the people that they are trying to elect so that they can get what they want?” Saxby asked.

“If it’s a developer, there are a number of potentially big developments in the community that are looking for a pro-development council in order to be elected—and there are decisions that need to be made that will inform whether those developments will go through or not.”

Woodfibre LNG—a proposed Liquid Natural Gas export terminal that would move 2.1 million tonnes of gas per year—has been trying to reach a **tax deal** with the district council. Saxby believes the company wants to influence the public’s opinion in order to get the agreement that they want.

The cost for the project has risen from \$1.6 billion to \$5.1 billion, and recently received a lifeline from Enbridge, which announced it would acquire a 30 per

cent stake in the project in July.

New arrivals in Squamish politics



Squamish Voices Attack ads

Early backer Jeff Ballingal says he isn't involved anymore.



Squamish Now Attack ads

"Dikran Bedirian" can't be reached at the number he submitted to Elections BC



Squamish Forward Criticism and petition

Woodfibre LNG was an early backer. Contributors have had ties to a resort proposal and Woodfibre.



Three new groups attacking sitting councillors have arrived on the Squamish scene in the last year and a half.

LNG project backed 'community' site

The Squamish Forward [website](#) first appeared in the summer of 2021 and features editorials written by local community members on various issues. At its launch, the site was credited to Evan Drygas, who presented the page as something he founded with a group of concerned residents.

“Squamish Forward is a forum where we can talk about the Squamish we want for our kids,” Drygas wrote at the time.

“If Council isn’t going to advocate for a bigger and better Squamish, then as community members, we will,” reads another entry on the site.

The page pledged to “advocate for increased economic diversification, more local employment, and an increased business tax base for Squamish.”

Nowhere was it mentioned that a major fossil fuel export project—Woodfibre LNG—had a hand in its creation.

In a statement to The Breach, Woodfibre LNG confirmed it was involved with Squamish Forward when it first launched, but said that the company is no longer associated with it.

The website was first conceptualized as a nonprofit “that supported community economic recovery post-COVID-19,” said the statement attributed to communications director Rebecca Scott.

“At the very beginning, Woodfibre helped bring together some local people who had indicated interest in this type of initiative,” she wrote. “By the time the organization made the decision to become partisan, Woodfibre LNG had discontinued any involvement.”

Scott did not respond to questions about how much money Woodfibre LNG invested in Squamish Forward, nor did she clarify specifically when Woodfibre LNG halted its involvement.

Earlier this year, Squamish Forward promoted an [online petition](#) that encouraged residents to vote against the district borrowing up to \$16 million to upgrade public works.

“It’s highly unusual for alternative approval processes to gather such participation from the public,” [reported](#) the *Squamish Chief*, a weekly newspaper. “They are a routine part of local government.”

In another [story](#) in the *Squamish Chief*, Councillor Eric Andersen said he chose to write for Squamish Forward after he was approached “to participate in this dialogue initiative with an opinion piece.”

“I was not informed or consulted on the later initiative of a petition against a loan authorization for the planned public works building, and certainly would not have endorsed it,” he told the Chief.

“The outcome was, in fact, a surprise to me. It is disruptive and costly for the District and its genuine needs.”

Gord Addison, a Squamish resident of 26 years, is one of the “community contributors” for Squamish Forward. He got involved with the site in September 2021 and is now running for Squamish council as an independent.

His campaign [website](#) includes a transparency statement stating he has worked for Woodfibre LNG in the past but stopped when he decided to run for council. He states that he worked for the company full time for two years from 2014 and 2016, and then more recently took on some smaller contract work.

“For about the last year, I have been placing digital ads for WLNG [...] I cancelled the arrangement when I decided to run for council,” the disclaimer states.

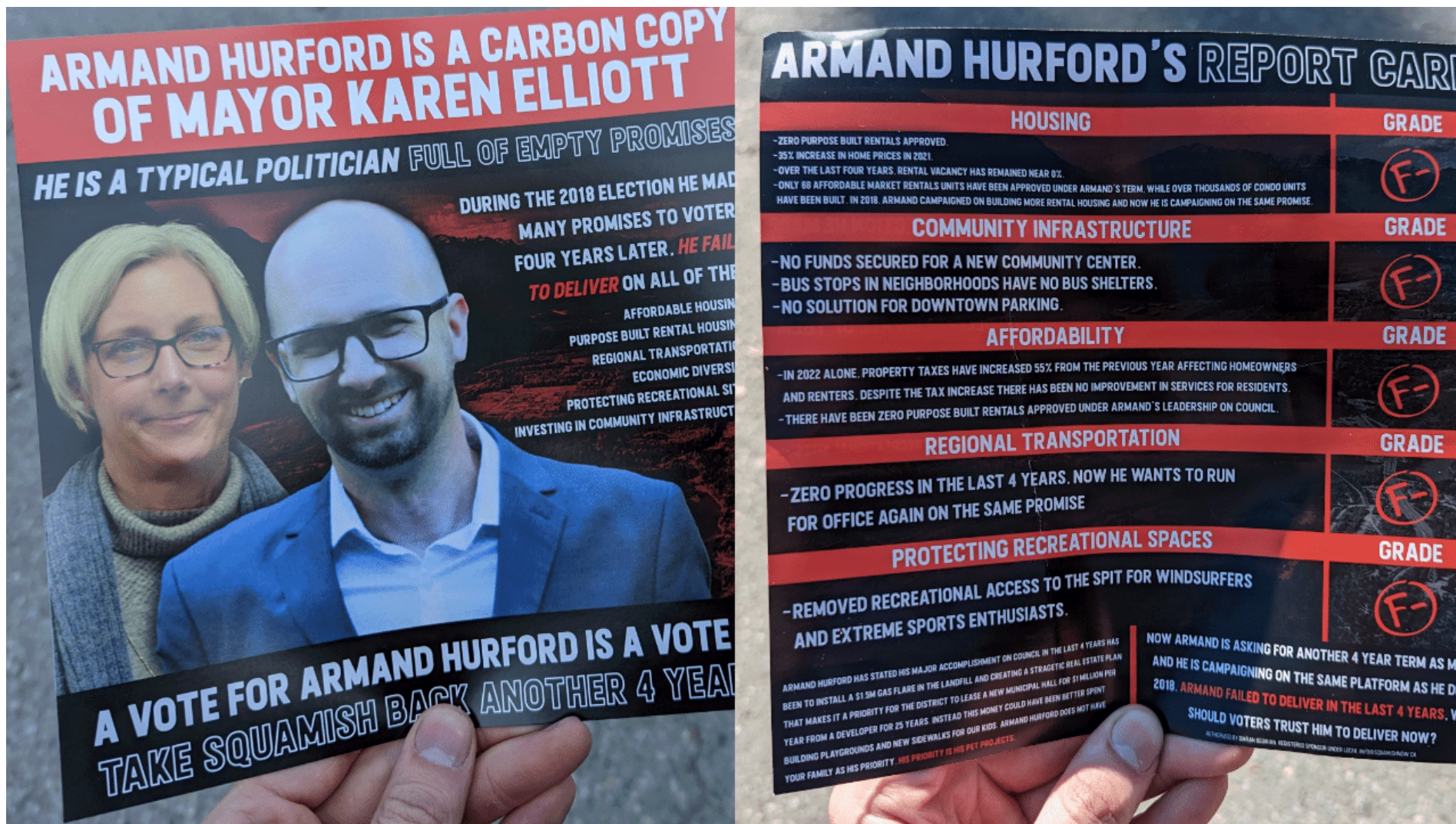
Addison also disclosed that he has done contract work for Garibaldi at Squamish, a planned all-season resort that has faced regulatory delays.

In an interview with The Breach, Addison said Woodfibre LNG was involved with Squamish Forward at the beginning but then he took it over from there.

“Woodfibre kind of got the ball rolling,” he told The Breach. “I took it over and I was left to find funding and contributors of my own.”

Addison said Woodfibre was “clearly out” when things got more political on the site, and that he now sees Squamish Forward as a mechanism to promote community conversation. He also clarified that there is no connection with the Canada Proud-linked Squamish Voices.

“If I’ve got a criticism I put my name on it,” he said. “I’m happy to write out an article and clearly explain my thoughts and that and get the discussion going—sometimes I’m right, sometimes I’m wrong.”



Some of the attack flyers that have appeared in Squamish residents' mailboxes in the last year.

Voices of the Proud?

Also operating under similar names, but with no identifiable connection to Squamish Forward, are local political groups Squamish Voices and Squamish Now.

While Squamish Forward is not featuring anonymous posts or outwardly smearing candidates like the other two, Saxby said all three groups are “sneaky and underhanded” and suspects they are trying to manipulate citizens in order to influence the election.

Residents say both have been sending political attack flyers to homes across the district.

The funder—or funders—behind **Squamish Voices** remains unknown. Data collected from Facebook ad disclosures reveals up to \$78,000 has been spent on sponsored posts alone, most of them political attacks, since the page’s inception in March of 2021.

“When Squamish Voices started advertising it was really concerning because they were clearly targeting hot button issues in Squamish in a way that was designed to manipulate people and to manipulate their opinions,” Saxby said.

“We have been monitoring the ads and there’s been mailouts to our homes as well—so many mailouts have been sent out, attacking councillors.”

In March, a National Observer **investigation** tied the Squamish Voices account –along with others across Canada–with the right-wing political influence group Canada Proud, run by Jeff Ballingall’s Mobilize Media Group.

The pages appear on the surface to be community-run advocacy groups, but their associations with big money reveal a more unscrupulous purpose.

Postmedia **reported** in August that Vancouver billionaire Chip Wilson donated \$380,000 to Pacific Prosperity Network (PPN), a group whose goal is to help right-leaning, pro-business candidates to win municipal elections. PPN is responsible for the Facebook page **BC Proud**.

Wilson sent a letter encouraging his wealthy contacts to donate to the organization. “Tired of the radical left winning elections?” a pitch on PPN’s Facebook page reads. “The Pacific Prosperity Network is leading the way to restoring common sense in our provincial and municipal governments.”

PPN’s **website** states: “There are no limits to the amount that you can contribute, nor does Pacific Prosperity Network have any requirement to disclose the names of individuals or organizations that make contributions.”

Ballingall’s Mobilize Media Group, which has now been **reportedly** hired by federal Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, boasts that they “work extensively with leading North American firms to help clients change public opinion.”

“Mobilize Media Group has not worked with Squamish Voices since June,”
Ballingall told The Breach in an email.

He did not respond to requests for an interview.



Political debates in Squamish often centre on density vs. sprawl, industrial development vs. preservation. Photo: Gotovan

Anonymous voices with heavy allegations

Leading up to the election, the Squamish Voices Facebook account posted various political attack ads which wrapped up in July when B.C. elections financing rules kicked in.

Then, on September 11, the account posted a bombshell allegation apparently directed at Armand Hurford—the one sitting councillor who is running for mayor.

“Two women have reached out to us with sexual assault claims against a sitting councillor who is now running for Mayor,” reads the post on the Squamish Voices Facebook page.

“We are interviewing them. If there is anyone else that wants to share their story or have any other tips on this individual, please reach out to us. [...] We will protect your privacy.”

During his campaign, Hurford has refused meetings with developers, promised to manage the town’s growth and expressed that he does not support the Garibaldi resort development.

The Breach emailed the account associated with Squamish Voices twice, and sought comment on the allegation, but did not receive a response.

Squamish Now also ran political attack ads, mostly against Hurford. The account is run by “Dikran Bedirian,” who registered with Elections BC as a sponsor.

The phone number registered under Bedirian’s name was not in service when the Breach attempted to make contact through phone calls or text messages. The Breach also reached out to Hurford for comment but did not receive a response.

“[Squamish Now] sponsored paid Facebook ads in September which identified the sponsor of the ads as Dikran Bedirian and also included the organization name Squamish Now,” a statement from Elections BC said.

“We contacted Dikran Bedirian to ensure their ads clearly identified the sponsor [...] After we spoke all of the ads that were promoted under the name Squamish Now were deactivated.”

Jeffrey Dvorkin, a senior fellow at Massey College and the former head of the University of Toronto’s journalism program, said anonymous online attacks aren’t necessarily out to change public opinion overnight—but what they do successfully is plant seeds of doubt.

“Even if the source of the allegation is dubious, it is often enough to swing votes especially when the vote is very close,” he explained.

“We need to be more skeptical—not necessarily more cynical—but certainly more skeptical, about the tsunami of content that’s on the Internet these days.

Some of it's done very professionally.”

He said if a website doesn't say who's behind it, who supports it, where the money comes from, and how citizens can contact the person behind it—then that website is to be distrusted.



A trail near Squamish. Many are attracted to the areas outdoor hiking, biking and climbing features. Photo: Jennifer C.

Unknown funders, specific targets

This election, a new slate of candidates called Squamish First has appeared, led by candidate Mike Young, a property manager **seeking** the mayoral seat. Young is running against Armand Hurford and Deanna Lewis (Kalkalath).

“There has been 12 years of no forward-thinking vision to invest in new infrastructure to match the exponential growth,” the Squamish First website declares. In the recent past, councillors have generally been elected as independents—the concept of a slate departs from that norm.

Despite new candidates on the ballot, the list of people seeking office has shrunk significantly. This year, the council candidate list is 10 people, while during the last election in 2018 there were 22. Part of the reason the list has shrunk, Coun. Stoner believes, is because of the negative online discourse.

“We have a really strong record in this community of people stepping forward for these roles and we’re not seeing that this time around,” said Coun. Stoner. “I don’t think you can tease those two elements apart.”

Squamish Mayor Karen Elliott, who has led the district since 2018 but is not seeking re-election, said that while criticism is normal, the influx of anonymous attacks in the last couple of years is not.

“We always have those people that consistently show up at meetings and ask questions and criticize,” she told The Breach.

“This is a very different tactic and it potentially has greater ramifications especially if we don’t speak out about it and identify it. I think it’s a wound that can fester and do great damage.”

Elliott has been a target of many of the Squamish Voices ads, which often feature unflattering images of her and refer to her government as “Team Karen.”

One ad features an image of Elliott smiling, superimposed next to a headline about property crime increase. The claims range from typical political attacks—accusations of reckless spending, incompetence or backroom deals—to the absurd: “Doug Race and Jenna Stoner do not want your family to own a car.”

While it was confirmed that Ballingall’s Mobilize Media had been running the Squamish Voices account before June, it’s not clear who was paying his firm, what their motivation is, or who continues to post on the account—including the allegation against Hurford.

Several sources pointed out that the attack ads seemed to be targeting four specific members of council—Elliott, Stoner, Race and Chris Pettingill.

The political ads came on the heels of a separate series of sponsored posts from the Cheema Lands Facebook account, which focused on the same four members of council.

The Cheema Lands ads began in December of 2020, shortly after Lower Mainland developer Bob Cheema requested—but did not receive—the district’s permission to start building on his 422-acre property in Squamish.

The seven-member Squamish council was split 4-3, but ultimately shut down a proposal regarding district lots 509 and 510—known locally as the Cheema Lands—to **extend** the growth management boundary.

“Citizens of Squamish are not dumb,” reads one of the Cheema Lands ads from February of 2021. “They can see the game Karen is playing with our town.”

Based on data estimates by The Breach, Cheema Lands has spent up to \$19,000 on sponsored posts from its Facebook account since November of 2020—most of them political ads criticizing Elliott, Stoner, Race and Pettingill.

In March of 2021, the separate Squamish Voices account was created and began campaigning against the same four councillors. Squamish Voices targeted Hurford after he announced he was running for mayor.

“Those four don’t normally vote together on very many issues, but they did in this instance,” Elliott said about the council’s vote involving Cheema Lands.

The Breach contacted Cheema Lands via email on Sept. 21 and again on Oct. 2 —asking if the group could clarify whether they had any involvement with the Squamish Voices account. Cheema Lands did not respond before publication. Attempts to reach Cheema Lands by phone were also unsuccessful.

The Breach also reached out to Aran Cheema, who **registered** as a principal official of an electoral organization through Elections BC for a group called Squamish Community Coalition, and he did not respond. The Squamish Community Coalition hasn't appeared to be active in any way since Cheema registered it.

After one Squamish resident speculated in a comment on Facebook that Squamish Voices might have a vested interest in Cheema Lands, he received a message with a legal threat saying the post needed to be removed within 24 hours.

“It has come to our attention that you are claiming that Cheema Lands is behind a page called ‘Squamish Voices,’” the message said, in part. “This is completely false and defamatory as we do not have anything to do with ‘Squamish Voices.’”

Ad spending on Facebook

Nov. 2019 to Sept. 2022



Facebook ad reporting does not give exact figures, but provides a range between maximum and minimum spending. That range is illustrated here.

Data compiled by The Breach shows how much some of the actors discussed here spent on Facebook ads.

Bob Cheema is well-known in the Lower Mainland as a developer, and has been acquiring and developing commercial and residential properties around the Lower Mainland since the 1990s.

In recent years Cheema has launched two high-profile defamation lawsuits against local politicians in Surrey, after a council candidate made allegations that suggested Cheema had influence over the city's mayor. The same former candidate swore in an affidavit that Cheema told him he had spent "more than \$300,000" on the Surrey municipal campaign.

Cheema has denied the allegations and said he has put his business interests in Surrey on hold.

When asked if she has any suspicion about who is behind Squamish Voices, Elliott was careful to avoid naming names. "It's very hard for us to point the finger at anyone without potentially being accused of libel or slander," she said.

Coun. John French, who voted in favour of the Cheema Lands proposal and is seeking re-election, said he doesn't think it's appropriate to make any allegations against developers.

“Anonymous and outside voices are dividing our community, and doing so quite purposefully to create disruption,” he said. “And I don’t approve of that.”

However, he added: “The optics certainly do not look good.”



It can be difficult to see who is responsible for the drastic shift in political discourse in Squamish. Photo: Ryan Devlin

‘Shadowy figures behind the scenes’

In Squamish, Saxby said she is deeply worried about the lack of transparency when it comes to people apparently trying to influence the election. Although

her group My Sea To Sky is politically involved, she said, they don't try to hide their identities.

"There are a lot of shadowy figures behind the scenes, who are not willing to show their faces, who are trying to influence this election. And that's really concerning," she said.

"We need stronger election laws. If somebody goes and arranges to deliver attack ads through Canada Post, that information needs to be made publicly available so we know who is behind anonymous attack ads."

Coun. Stoner said that while she feels that Elections BC does a good job in general, "they are not prepared or equipped for this level of sophistication of online meddling of local elections."

"The processes that they have are too slow, the reporting mechanisms all happen after the election so there is no recourse during the campaign period if this is happening and then you're just stuck after the fact trying to fight four years with a potentially-contentious council," she said.

Stoner also said she knows that people have reported the Squamish Voices account to Facebook many times, to no avail.

For now, Saxby said what is happening online is having very real impacts on her community as they head to the polls on Oct. 15.

“We don’t know who’s behind Squamish Voices, but whoever it is has fundamentally undermined democracy in this community, and that is not acceptable,” she said.

“The fact that our community has been under attack for over a year in the leadup to a critical election—quite frankly I’m scared for the future of our community.”

Facebook ad data for this story was collected by Ben Cuthbert.

Correction: A previous version of this story stated that Karen Elliott has led Squamish for two terms as its mayor. In fact she has been mayor for one term and before that sat on council.

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1 comment

John M. Darling

Nov 13 2022 at 2:38 pm

As past President of Windsurfing Canada and organizer of many national championships on this Spit, I am distressed at the loss of the “Spit” as a primary “alpha” spot for the sport, kiting, foiling, winging (even paddling) — one of Canada’s strongest wind and high-performance locations!

What does BC Sailing Association and BC’s sailing community have to say, in defence of this world-class sailing spot? Let’s get a defence mobilized!

John Darling 416-928-3086

Comments are closed.

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