

# Mack Laing Nature Park

Infosheet — July 2018



Situated on the shore of Comox Bay, Mack Laing Nature Park encompasses 8.3 acres of natural, coastal environs. The property was originally owned by Hamilton Mack Laing, who built his home (Shakesides) on the property in 1950. He gave the waterfront property to the Town of Comox to be used for the public's enjoyment as a nature park. Since 1983, the Town of Comox has operated Mack Laing Nature Park, adding trails and interpretive signs to foster the public's appreciation of nature.

In 2009, the Town of Comox, together with the Nature Trust of British Columbia, purchased three parcels of neighbouring land (including Laing's former property Baybrook) to expand the public greenspace along Brooklyn Creek and the Comox waterfront.

## MACK LAING'S GIFTS TO COMOX

Hamilton Mack Laing (1883-1982) was a prolific naturalist, photographer, writer, artist and noted ornithologist, whose work from the Comox waterfront since 1922 earned him worldwide recognition.

In 1973, Mr. Laing deeded his property and home to the Town of Comox, in trust and in perpetuity, to be used as a public nature park for recreation and conservation, with the use of it to him for his lifetime. Mr. Laing lived at Shakesides until his death in 1982. When Mr. Laing died, through his will he gave the residual cash from his estate (approx. \$48,000) to the Town of Comox, in trust, "for the improvement and development of [his] home as a natural history museum" and to support the museum's ongoing operation.

The Town of Comox did not consider the funds to be sufficient for a museum and looked for other funding options. The funds were placed by the Town of Comox in the H.M. Laing Trust Fund.

The Town of Comox rented out Shakesides until June 2014. Between 1982 and 2000, the Town spent some of the Trust Fund to maintain Shakesides, improve the surrounding park and memorialize Mack Laing.

In 2017, the Town repaid these expenditures plus interest as some of the expenditures were not authorized by the terms of the trust applicable to the money. The Trust Fund is presently \$256,000. The Town now seeks to use the Trust Fund, with the court's approval, to finance the construction of a viewing platform and the viewing platform's future maintenance and repair.



## DIFFICULT DECISIONS

In 2015, the Town announced its plans to demolish Shakesides, as it was not possible to carry out the charitable objectives of the will because of insufficient funds and the home's state of disrepair. The Attorney General of B.C. advised the Town of Comox that demolition should not proceed unless the terms of the trust were changed by the court.

## FINDING A PATH FORWARD

In late 2015, the Town established the Mack Laing Nature House Advisory Committee, with members from Town Council and staff, the Mack Laing Heritage Society and community at large.

This advisory body to Council was tasked with: reviewing the will, reviewing the potential of converting Shakesides into a natural history museum, identifying funding opportunities to leverage the Trust Fund and identifying potential courses of action.

The Advisory Committee issued its report in June 2016, after having reviewed three options:

1. Restore the house and use the facility as a stand-alone natural history museum,
2. Retain and restore the house as a heritage property, and use it for tours and conferences,
3. Carefully disassemble the building and use the site and some materials to create a viewing site/platform in conjunction with the existing walkway

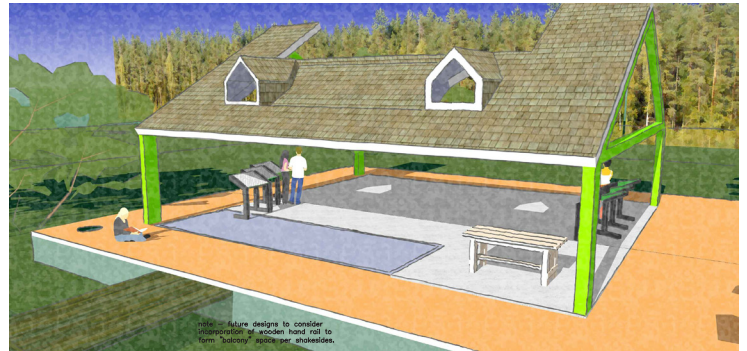
The Committee, by majority decision, recommended the third option as the most practical and feasible, while honouring the spirit and intent of Mack Laing's will. They also recommended that signage and permanent displays be erected to further honour the legacy and work of Mr. Laing. Two members of the Advisory Committee opposed the decision. Council accepted the Advisory Committee's recommendation and directed staff to begin the process to modify the terms of the trust.

## CURRENT STATUS

In early 2017, the Town of Comox made an application to the B.C. Supreme Court for an order varying the trust as it applies to the money in order to "further both the intention of the will-maker and the best interests of the Town". The Town of Comox proposes that the trust be varied to allow funds to be used for construction of a viewing platform on the site of Shakesides, once Shakesides has been removed.

The Town of Comox has obtained design and cost estimates for a platform that has a height and roofline replicating Shakesides, and which incorporates some of the materials from Shakesides. The Town of Comox plans to equip the viewing platform with information panels covering topics on local natural history for the benefit of users of the nature park. Funds remaining after construction would be held in a reserve fund for the maintenance and repair of the platform.

Currently, the Town of Comox's application remains before the Court, with the next court date scheduled for October 2018.



Rendering of the proposed viewing platform

## LEARN MORE

For updates about the park and Town's plans moving forward, visit [www.comox.ca/macklaingpark](http://www.comox.ca/macklaingpark)

To learn more about Mack Laing and his legacy, visit the Mack Laing Heritage Society website at: [www.macklaingsociety.ca](http://www.macklaingsociety.ca)

Or visit the Comox Museum and Archives at: [www.comoxmuseum.ca](http://www.comoxmuseum.ca)

