

Getting past political roadblocks to sustainability

AAREN MADDEN

Karel Roessingh sees transportation system improvements just waiting to be taken from the waste stream.

A while back, my fella Warren and I bought a 1985 Volkswagen Westfalia. Then we swapped out the engine for a diesel from a 1997 Volkswagen Golf. Ultimate goal? Running on 100 percent biodiesel. Lower emissions, renewable fuel source, all that. Enter Karel Roessingh, accomplished arranger, composer and pianist, current Highlands councillor and former mayor. Along with engineering consultant Don Goodeve and Victoria Symphony violist Kenji Fuse (musicians and biofuels, what gives?), Roessingh co-founded the Island Biodiesel Co-op in 2007. He braids the three seemingly disparate skeins of his life together at his Highlands home, where I met him one morning with a dual purpose: talking dream cities and joining the Island Biodiesel Co-op.

While Warren was home outfitting the van for our biodiesel maiden voyage camping trip, I discovered that Roessingh first arrived here from Calgary in 1974 to study music at the University of Victoria. But “the letter got lost in the mail,” he smiles, explaining in a polished gravel voice that he stayed because “I’ve always thought this place is pretty much close to paradise.”

The teaching degree he eventually earned gathered dust since he was so busy playing music and partnering in a recording studio, where he wrote and produced music for television. Right now, in addition to gigs all over town, he is mixing albums for singer Maureen Washington, among others, and working on the music for a documentary on Metchosin potters Robin Hopper and Judi Dyelle in his home studio.

On the cover of 2008’s *Nature Boy*, one of Roessingh’s nine solo piano CDs, he is (literally) out standing in a field, pitchfork in hand. His sense of stewardship goes far beyond and further back, though, and when he moved to the Highlands in 1989, he became involved in the community association. When the municipality subsequently incorporated, he was on the first council, and later became mayor for two terms.

“I wanted to be mayor to protect whatever we could here, and make careful, sustainable land-use decisions that wouldn’t destroy the neighbourhood,” he explains, “to protect this valuable place.” His mayoralty coincided with an incredibly contentious time in the Highlands. For over a decade, the Bear Mountain development was council’s major preoccupation. A fairly toothless development agreement, which came about when Roessingh was voted out of office in favour of a pro-development team making unfulfilled promises of great benefits, has left him disheartened. Commitments of tax-generating commercial development never materialized, but most importantly, water-use monitoring for the golf courses is yet to be resolved, and now that the banks own the property, says Roessingh, “I don’t know if we will ever know how much water they are actually using, which is a real shame.”

What we *can* do to protect this place, we *should* be doing. To that end, he says, “our largest thrust this term in Highlands has been sustainability,” and a task force has made 42 recommendations, including net-zero zoning, where energy, water and waste consumption and

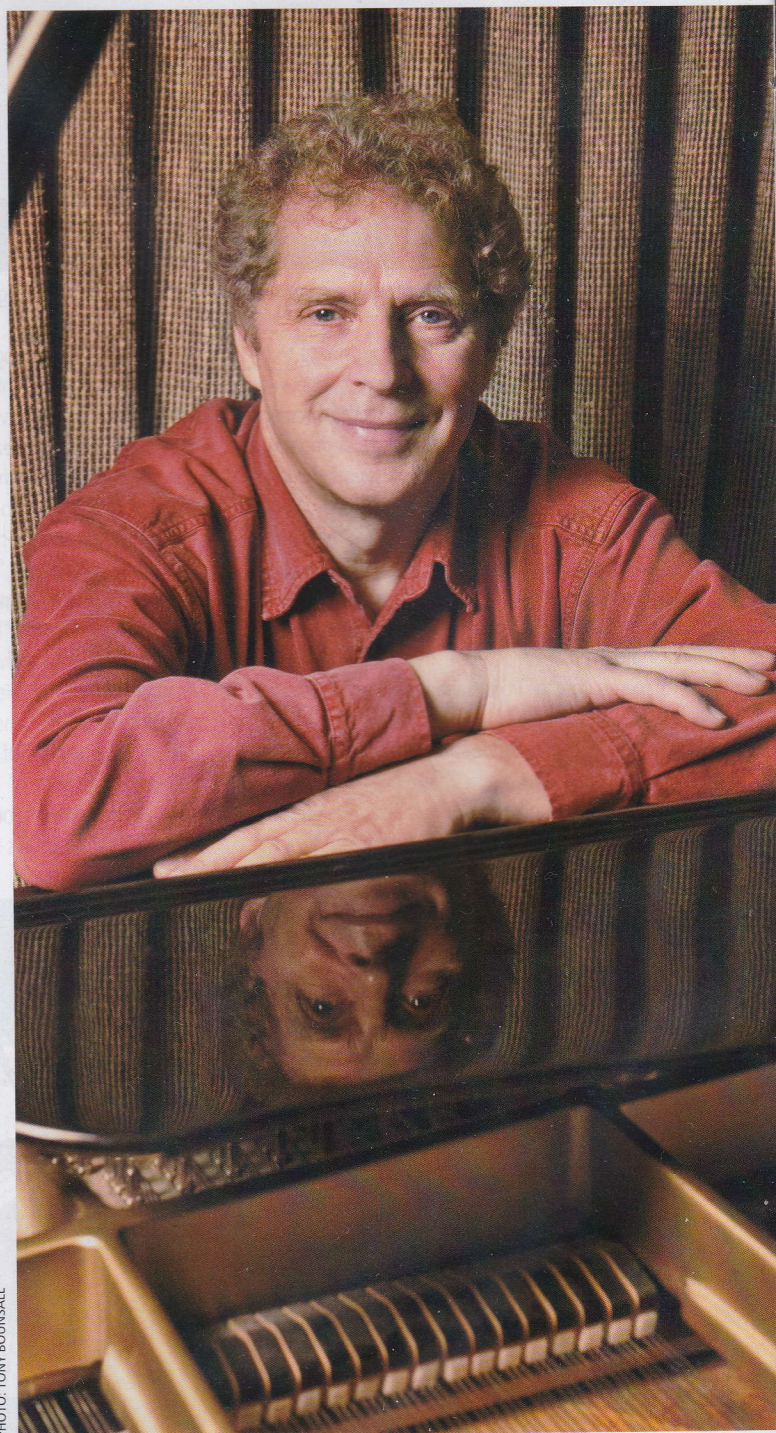


PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Karel Roessingh

“EVEN MY GRANDSON KNOWS that, though he'd like to fly airplanes one day, they may not be around much longer because it may be difficult to find fuel for them. That's how we have to think of travel.” —Karel Roessingh

production balance out. The document raises an interesting point: “Land use implies ‘consuming’ the land. The land with this zoning needs to be productive now, in five years, and in 500 years.”

Transportation is an essential component of the plan, and of vital importance to Roessingh, who encourages alternatives like rail. Alas, the province recently declared no interest in investing in commuter rail in the region, citing lack of use (but if you actually *made it available*...oh, never mind). “One of our big problems is politics,” Roessingh observes: “We have a provincial government working on destroying the arts, clearly not interested in rail or any other options for this region, not interested in housing. We have senior governments that are not interested in Victoria because we don't vote for them, and their policies are just socially destructive. We have an overpass now at McTavish Road because a federal minister lives out there,” he sighs.

“We have to encourage transportation modes that we will be able to use for a very long time without having serious negative impacts on the environment. Even my grandson knows that, though he'd like to fly airplanes one day, they may not be around much longer because it may be difficult to find fuel for them. That's how we have to think of travel,” says Roessingh.

Which is why he composed the original tune “Diesel” and covered Janis Joplin's “Mercedes Benz” on *Nature Boy*, and why, after much research five and a half years ago, he bought himself one to run on biodiesel. Originally, as Highlands mayor he had access to the City of Victoria fleet's imported b20 (that's 20 percent biodiesel), but now it runs on b100 made locally by Co-op members who get waste oil from restaurants like Barb's Place. While there isn't enough to solve all our fuel needs, “if there is waste oil, why aren't we making it into fuel as best we can?” asks Roessingh. “Certainly there is a lot more potential.”

But plans for a distribution site have been scuttled by a 22.5 percent tax increase imposed last January, and now the Island Biodiesel Co-op—and the biodiesel industry in all of

BC—struggles to survive. Locally-produced biodiesel is no longer exempt from the carbon tax or the motor fuel tax, and at the same time, in a move the Co-op calls “logically and morally flawed,” petrodiesel has been given a five percent exemption. Now, instead of being cheaper, BC-made biodiesel is, at \$1.25, much higher than the petro pump price.

On August 24, the Co-op's board met with Deputy Finance Minister Graham Whitmarsh and Glen Armstrong to urge him to exempt BC-made biofuels. Roessingh left with guarded hope. “I was surprised they made the admission that biodiesel shouldn't have carbon taxes on it, and they would consider our proposal to remove it and to phase in the motor fuel tax, since they slapped them all on at once. We are not opposed to paying what is essentially a road tax, but it certainly doesn't encourage local biodiesel industry,” he says.

In heating, in transportation, and in finding new sources, like, say, algae, or even coffee grounds, there is great potential with the right policies. “We have lots of energy options, which involve a fair amount of research, but when you compare to the oil sands, which is so destructive—there are so many better ways,” Roessingh concludes.

So, in an effort to do what my little family can, I hand Roessingh \$100 and he hands me share number 60 in the Island Biodiesel Co-op, and we bid good day.

When we filled up for our first trip, given the fuel already in our tank, our actual ratio was about b60. On arriving home, weary kids marinated in saltwater and forest, Warren left the engine running for just a second longer. “Doesn't that just hum?” he asked.



Aaren Madden wrote this article in her Volkswagen van. It makes a great office. See www.islandbiodiesel.ca for more info on the Co-op.

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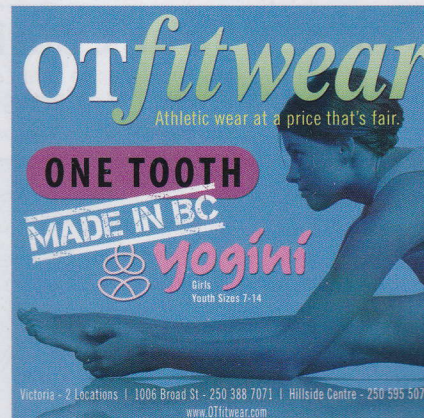


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