Report from the lasqueti.ca webminion
LIAS AGM 2008

In September 2007 the LIAS board asked me to 'take the lasqueti.ca website to the next level'. They provided me with a vision, paraphrased, "to improve communication, engagement, and local commerce within the wider Lasqueti community", along with some basic goals and priorities:
1) Improve the usability and organizational structure of the site;
2) Add features that allow local artists and business to use the site to market their wares;
3) Create a uniquely Lasqueti space on the web with community involvement and engagement, to counter the plethora of real estate and tourism marketing sites;

Beyond providing a basic direction to head in, I was asked to work largely independently to develop the site as I thought most appropriate.   Herein I will report on what I've done in the past year, what my goals are for the coming year, and how I see my role on the LIAS team evolving.

Progress Report
The most fundamental change was a move to a Content Management System (CMS) based site. This allows any community member to take part in creating the content on the site, by posting articles, announcements, events, ads, products, and photos. Despite the effort expended and the relatively slow adoption rate by the community, I feel this was an important step forward and will create a more inclusive, engaging site as people begin to see the potential.

Website Development

- lasqueti.ca was re-developed from the ground up to run on Drupal, an open-source CMS and web development framework;
- a custom theme was developed to duplicate the existing site's graphic design;
- the site was re-organized into 4 primary categories: Community, Arts & Culture, Marketplace, and Visitors
- many community-content features were added, including classified ads, photo galleries, news and events, blogs, and discussion forums
- a set of taxonomies were developed to allow anyone to classify their content so it appears in the appropriate location(s) on the site
- several custom applications were designed, including the community calendar, community photo browser, business directory, and the farmer's market
- custom content types were developed to make it easy for ordinary people to create and manage their own 'home' pages – this includes the ability to maintain a photo gallery, product list, blog journal, or news and event listing on any page
- a custom application was developed to allow users to easily maintain an ever-changing list of available products in both the farmer's market and on their home page
- approx. 100 pages of content were designed and published on the site

- a how-to book with help pages documenting common tasks was developed (but still needs lots more work!), along with complete documentation for the site design.

Community Engagement

- the site currently has over 150 registered users, representing people from our wider community who have taken enough interest in the site to register for an account;
- ~50 pages have been created for local artists, businesses, services, and non-profit groups; ~30 of these pages are being maintained by their 'owner'
- there are more than 35 listings in 10 categories in the business directory
- ~60 products have been listed in the farmer's market
- the most popular community-contributed-content, by far, is the photo gallery, with almost 200 photos contributed to date.
- the communication tools are generally under-utilized at this point: there are 80 discussion threads posted on the forum, mostly from Peter's list; several people are posting classified ads (with auto-expire feature); blogs are not being used much yet, but are finding unique applications (like 'favourite poem'); with over 100 posts, the News and Events are by far the most popular way of posting information.
- eight articles were published in Our Isle & Times to inform and encourage the community to adopt and use the site – these were quite effective, and I received much positive feedback on them.

Support

I spent a fair amount of time this past year answering queries and helping people solve problems. Here are some stats to give you a feel of the magnitude of this work:
- Answering queries: I replied to over 100 queries that came through the site contact form
- Suggestions, Feedback, Support: I answered more than an additional 100 e-mails about some aspect the website
- Creating e-mail accounts: we now have about 30 people using a lasqueti.ca e-mail addresses. Each account requires about 10 mins and 2 e-mails sent to set-up.
- E-mail: I had about 100 e-mail exchanges to help people with their e-mail, deal with e-mail issues,
- Server support: well over 100 e-mail communications with our host company
- All told, I have received over 700 and sent over 600 e-mails as webmaster this past year
- In addition, I receive between 2 – 5 phone support calls each month, mostly for e-mail related issues.

Plans and Goals

There is still much to do to realize the potential role lasqueti.ca can play within our community, and loads of on-going support and maintenance. Here's what I hope can be achieved in the coming year.

Website Development

The site is functioning well and getting good feedback. There are still many novel and interesting services the site could provide, but given the number of under-utilized features, the focus should be on improving usability, instructions, and the organization, promotion, and creation of content. Especially needing work:

- date feature for posting events (several people have had problems entering dates)
- web-editor for formatting posts (this is bare bones and I haven't spent any time tuning it)
- new layout for Community and Arts & Culture pages (integration with the "My Community" content tracker)

In addition, I would like to accomplish these goals:

- move the site to a new host (our current host is unreliable and offers poor service)
- upgrade the software on the site – improved versions of many modules are available
- upgrade the subscriptions module, which allows users to get new content from the site via e-mail (subscriptions were removed from the site due to an issue with spam being sent to subscribers – this has been fixed, but I need to upgrade to the new version).
- improve the anti-spam techniques used on the site (the site NEVER shows spam publicly, but the webmaster does need to spend time every week dealing with spam that accumulates in the approval queue).
- sub-domains for local businesses: several people have asked for a more tailored site for their small business. I would like to offer a paid service to have an independent site running on a sub-domain on lasqueti.ca (e.g., echofarm.lasqueti.ca or clevertreverandmrp.lasqueti.ca)

Community Building and Support

Without an active, engaged community of users and contributors, lasqueti.ca is stagnant. Generating wider adoption rates and more local users will be an important, on-going task.

- continued community building through Isle & Times articles and encouraging local artists and businesses to list a page;
- adding new content, including more basic community information and business / artisan pages (there are currently about 6 people waiting to have pages created for their endeavour)
- in-person training and better help and documentation for people publishing content.

The Webmaster's role in LIAS

I was originally hired into a paid position. At the time, the board made three things clear about this position: (1) they had about $4000 to spend; (2) they didn't know where future funding would come from; and (2) they wanted the kind of commitment to the position that only money can buy. Although I have not been paid, to date, I have received my internet service in-kind, which I value greatly. In fact, I have not, to date, requested any pay primarily because I so admire the hard work, effort, and enthusiasm donated by all the volunteers that work for LIAS. The other reason is my understanding of LIAS's financial solvency.   That said, I do think the original rationale for making the webmaster a paid position are valid, and, based on expectation, I did forgo other paid opportunities to work on lasqueti.ca at half-time for ~4 months last winter, and for 5 – 10 hours per

week on an ongoing basis for the remainder. I would like to donate a portion of this time to LIAS, as my contribution to their worthy community projects, yet I think it fair that LIAS should pay for at least $4000 worth of development effort they had originally contracted.

If the board would like me to stay on as webmaster, I will be happy to do so. I am willing to maintain the current site, keep it running and secure, and provide some basic support as a volunteer. In order to achieve all of the goals I have laid out for the coming year, LIAS will need to budget some funding for the position – I make my living doing this type of work, so to make development of lasqueti.ca a priority, I will have to give up other paid work.

I would also like to recommend that other paid support persons or volunteers could easily take over two largely independent tasks I've been doing, to allow more of my time to be spent developing the site and achieving its longer-term objectives.
1) technical support for the e-mail system (~2 - 5 hours per month).
    Responsibilities: Create & manage e-mail accounts; receive and respond to requests for new accounts; serve as technical support for people who are setting up their e-mail client or having trouble sending or receiving e-mail; liaison with the webmaster to resolve server or hosting service issues.
2) basic administration of website (~8-12 hours per month)
    Responsibilities: approve and administer access privileges for new users; receive and respond to contact queries from the website contact form; monitor approval queue to approve anonymous posts and remove spam; post news and events from the Isle & Times and mail-outs.
Both positions would require regular access to a high-speed internet connection, and a consistent, but low-level effort spent each week to ensure users are well supported and the systems are maintained. No particular technical skill is required for either position (I would be willing to provide training and support), but will need a willingness to learn without being intimidated by technology.

I applaud, then as now, the LIAS board for their vision and belief that a community-based website can play a positive role in both our local social and economic well-being – a belief I share. I am immensely proud of what we have accomplished at lasqueti.ca in this past year, and the potential it holds for our community in the future. Without reservation, I can say it is one of the best community-based sites I am aware of and I encourage the board to compare lasqueti.ca with similar efforts on some other gulf islands:
http://www.saltspringisland.org/
http://www.gabriolaisland.ca/
http://www.galianoisland.com/
http://www.quadraisland.ca/
http://cortesisland.com (a dot-com, but more similar to lasqueti.ca in content and idea)
http://denmanisland.ca (also developed with Drupal)
http://www.hornbyisland.net/ (probably the best of the lot)