

Watchdog Report on Sooke Council Special Council Meeting
August 31st 2021
Hester Vair for Watchdog Committee, Transition Sooke.

Mayor Maji Tait chairing the meeting, Councillors present: Al Beddows, Jeff Bateman, & Dana Lajeunesse. Virtually present: Megan McMath & Ebony Loggins. Also present: Chief Administrator Officer Norm McInnis & Director of Planning, Matthew Pawlow; Dialog consultant Jennifer Fix; Helen Ritts for the Official Community Plan Advisory Committee, and two other committee members also spoke as members of the public: Steve Grundy and Terry Cristall

Agenda item 5.1 & 5.2 Tenders for designing the expansion of the wastewater treatment plant and servicing it awarded to Stantec.

Agenda item 5.3 Discussion and Acceptance of the Draft Official Community Plan (OCP)

The draft OCP was accepted with notes from the OCP Advisory Committee and is ready to go out for another round of public engagement. Details about the plan and the dates for events organized around this current phase of public engagement can be found at:

<https://sooke.ca/district-services/departments/development-services/official-community-plan/>

My report is organized under four points, summarized below; full details follow.

1. **Presentation of the Draft Official Community Plan (OCP):** Jennifer Fix of the consultancy firm, Dialog, presented the draft OCP and it was well received. Council said that they found the draft itself hard going, but the presentation was much clearer. Bateman asked that they include the text of the presentation in the draft (so if you are ploughing through the draft OCP, you might see if you can get hold of the presentation).
2. **Dialog Presentation and Council Discussion on Climate:** In the discussion of climate issues there was evidence of a split on council, albeit a relatively cordial one. It seemed to me that Mayor Tait and Mr McInnis might have views that are not clearly on one side or the other. More details below.
3. **Dialog Presentation on Growth:** Dialog asserts that growth cannot be stopped or reduced, but the OCP proposes good management of growth.
4. **Teeth for the OCP** There was a significant discussion on how to make sure that the OCP actually works as a guide for the District. The importance of the zoning bylaw was mentioned, as well as the problem of pressure from developers, and the possibility of a body to keep the District on track. Pawlow had two answers to this concern - both of which may be of interest to Transition Sooke: (1) momentum, and (2) the review of the zoning bylaw. More details below.

1. Presentation of the Draft Official Community Plan (OCP):

- Jennifer Fix, for the consultant Dialog, made the presentation. Fix remarked that Sooke had a remarkable amount of public engagement compared to other community plans they have worked on. Transition Sooke might take heart from this because our commitment to work on this issue has had results.
- Dialog's process begins with themes from public engagement, boiled down into 3 theme areas, and 15 associated goals.
 - The 3 goal areas were: Sooke should be Green and Net-Zero (5 goals); Enjoyable & Distinct (6 goals); Equitable and respectful (4 goals). Each of the goals was mentioned briefly.
- Overall the draft was well received by council - they found it dense, but the presentation made much of that clear. Helen Ritts of Sooke's Advisory Committee on the OCP said several times

that she felt that everyone was on the same page and that the result was inspiring. The OCP Advisory Committee felt that they did not have long enough to go over it, but agreed that it could go forward into the next stage of public engagement - as long as their notes are reviewed by mayor and council.

2. Dialog Presentation and Subsequent Council Discussion on Climate.

- One of the 3 goal areas is 'Green and Net-Zero'. Dialog's reported goal here is 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 - which is the province's goal; Sooke adopted 50%.
- Dialog uses the report (by Colliers, I think) which says transportation is 55% of Sooke's greenhouse gas emissions and focuses on land use planning to keep growth from sprawling which reduces car trips.
- They argue that Sooke is very car dependent, quite apart from the commute eastward to work. Few residents have walkability, partly because of distance involved, but also because the indirect routes of the street network increases the walk. They said that making better infrastructure to get people to spend time downtown will also reduce car dependency.
- They included suggestions about green buildings and also protection of parks, green space, and ecological areas and agriculture.
- Helen Ritts of the OCP Advisory Committee said that the committee did not recommend a 40% target for carbon emissions because Sooke already agreed to 50%, and because there is already a committee in place working on that climate action.
- Mayor Tait agreed, remarking that the two issues are separate because some factors that affect emissions are outside the control of the municipality, and because those outside factors might change within the time frame (10 years) of the OCP. Her position is similar to that of Councillor Beddows and Chief Administrative Officer Norm McInnis, who at a different point in the meeting mentioned that they do not want to have a specific number. At a later point in the meeting when the issue came up again Mayor Tait responded a bit differently.
- McInnis said that if Sooke says we will follow the provincial targets then we won't need to go to the trouble of changing the targets in our OCP if they change theirs. Beddows acknowledged that the climate was an emergency issue but said (as he has before) that 'we should not put in something that is so strict we cannot meet it'.
- Taking the opposite view, Councillors Loggins and Bateman both said that they believe the 50% target that Sooke already adopted is important. Loggins said that it was a good thing that Sooke be seen as having set a number higher than the province - it was 'a bold move', and she wanted to see it in the document. Bateman reminded council that we have a strategic plan and we have said we want to be bold, and we have a plan. "We need to take a run at it, and to make a commitment". He also pointed out that municipalities are taking the lead in Canada on this issue - he mentioned the British Columbia Climate Leadership Council.
- After Loggins and Bateman spoke both McInnis and Tait were more positive - McInnis circumspectly so: 'We do have a target and a strategy to meet that target'. Mayor Tait more strongly so - she said that we did not want to present ourselves as taking the minimum, we want to set a high standard.
- Taking a bold stance is not easy - perhaps this is support for the idea that Transition Sooke needs to continue to play a role encouraging council to take these bold, but sometimes difficult, stands.

3. Dialog Presentation on Growth

- Fix's presentation said that the OCP is about managing growth well: "Sooke will grow. The question is how, not if." In the draft OCP attached to the agenda, the very last page contains questions that the Advisory Committee put to Dialog. One question was why the regional growth strategy numbers are being used as the target in the OCP. Dialog's response was that the OCP is agnostic on the issue of growth and does not create policies to encourage growth - it is, rather, a strategy for managing growth. This statement seemed to me to be disingenuous - if the OCP took a stand against growth then there would be various goals and policies to encourage things to move in that direction - policies that merely encourage growth to be less damaging are not 'agnostic'.
- In the presentation, Fix also claimed that the OCP must align with the Capital Regional District's (CRD) Regional Growth Strategy.
- The OCP contains the statement (from 2019 data) that 1800 homes needed by 2030 (from Colliers report). However 1200 of these are already ready to go (based on 'current zoning and proposals') - so we only need 600.
- Transition Sooke members might want to look at the section "Part 3: Growth management and land use", page 35 in the draft OCP. Dialog describes a 'compact growth strategy' which will concentrate growth around the town centre. They also address the protection of ecological areas, the need for more varied housing and more transportation choices.

4. How to make it happen

Implementation outlined in the draft OCP

- In the draft of the OCP there is a list of plans that the district will need to update: Sooke Zoning Bylaw, Town Centre Plan, District Wildfire Protection Plan, Agricultural Plan, Community Energy and Emissions Plan, Emergency Response and Business Continuity Plan, and Sooke Region Cultural Plan.
- The draft also contains a list of policies needed as part of an implementation strategy. A very rough idea of the emphasis in the OCP can be gleaned from the titles of the policy areas and the number of policies associated with each area (noted beside it); Land use-1; Transportation -12; Natural Environment - 20; Green Buildings - 6; Infrastructure - 9; Agriculture and Food Systems - 13; Community Economic Development - 11; Arts and Culture 3; Housing - 13; Recreation and Community Services -7; Equitable Community - 12.
- Bateman noted that 47 of these were short-term priorities, but there was no ordering of these priorities.

Giving the OCP Teeth

Councillor Bateman, Councillor McMath, Mayor Tait, Advisory Committee members Helen Fix & Mr Grundy all raised the issue of how to make sure that we do not drift from the OCP; they anticipated resistance from developers and other government bodies. Possibly Pawlow's answer suggests what strategies Transition Sooke might use to help keep the OCP on track.

- Bateman suggested that we need to be sure we have the capacity to stay on top of the OCP. He suggested that 'an implementation and monitoring committee would be a good idea'.
- McMath was also concerned about how to 'enforce' the OCP and pointed out that the last OCP drifted off course. She also asked how our plan blended with federal and provincial guidelines (for example treaty rights), and also with economic development. The response from staff

(McInnis, I think) was that, regarding treaty rights, they would be consulting with the T'Souke nation, and regarding government guidelines, that the province wants a document in hand before they will say how it fits with them and that there will be a legal review of the OCP.

- Mayor Tait was also concerned with getting the province on side and had a couple of examples where things were not built according to what Sooke wanted. Mcinnis responded that things are getting better and conversations with developers and province are reasonable.
- Maja asked how we get developers 'to pivot'. (Given that 1200 of the 1800 units needed before 2030 have already been approved, this is a real concern).
 - Staff did not have very encouraging answers at first - they said that if development applications were under review we could require them 'to come in alignment' with new rules.
 - Fix added that if a developer is new (for the last 600!) They could be asked to wait until the new OCP is in place, and staff mentioned that some developers have 'reached out to us' for more information about possible new rules.

Momentum and the Zoning Bylaw

Pawlow had two answers to this concern that Transition Sooke may keep in mind to as we think about how to contribute to the process. First, momentum, and second, the zoning bylaw.

- Pawlow said momentum was 'a key piece'. I assume the idea is that we need to get Sooke to identify around the strong elements of the OCP - something Transition Sooke can contribute to. Maja suggested 'celebrating and showcasing' the developments we like, also 'incentivizing'.
- Second is the zoning bylaw which will have to be rewritten to fit with the OCP. Pawlow said that in the past there was too much discretion and a better bylaw will have less discretion.
 - Mayor Tait pointed out, rather unhappily, that the OCP can be changed (presumably if a future council's wish to change direction).
 - Helen Ritt said that the Advisory Committee would like to stay involved and work on the zoning bylaw. Mayor Tait expressed some interest in this idea. (Perhaps Bateman's suggestion for a committee to oversee the OCP could be combined with this idea.)