

Watchdog Report on Sooke Council Regular Meeting Monday, February 28, 2022

Written by Hester Vair, for Watchdog Committee, Transition Sooke

Councillors present at the meeting: Mayor Tait, Councillors Jeff Bateman, All Beddows, Tony St-Pierre & Dana Iajeuness. Absent: Councillors Ebony Logins & Megan McMath.

Staff that I was aware were present: Norm McInnis, Chief Administrative Officer, Carolyn Mushata, Corporate Officer & Matthew Pawlow, Director of Planning and Development.

Members of the public : A delegation from the fire department; Herb Haldane, a developer, to give a presentation; and three speakers from the public: William Wallace, Susan Belford, Anna Russell, and Mrs Lewers.

SUMMARY

There are two issues of particular relevance to Transition Sooke at this meeting. First, a presentation by developer Herb Haldane with a proposal to reduce the time it takes to get a building permit in Sooke. Second, a motion to provide incentive for developers to build underground parking which Transition Sooke members William Wallace and Susan Belford spoke against. I have notes on other items on the agenda if anyone is interested.

1. Presentation to council by developer Herb Haldane (Item 5.2 on agenda, 11:27 on the tape)

Mr. Haldane's concern is that building permits in Sooke are not issued quickly enough. This is an ongoing issue - it was raised at the previous meeting and has been discussed in the newspaper. This is a critical issue for Transition Sooke

Haldane insisted that he does not want to be adversarial and instead offers the solution of a committee composed of councillors, some people 'from the industry', and some staff to work through the problem and streamline the process. He appeared very sure of his knowledge, spoke very confidently, and implied he could speak for other developers.

A few details about Haldane's presentation:

- Haldane made frequent mention that things were better in the past and have deteriorated.
- He made a number of references which attributed the problem to new staff.
- He compared Sooke's timeline for the approval of building permits to much faster times in other municipalities, specifically Langford's 48 hour turnaround.
- He suggested that some other municipalities allow developers to begin the development, using check lists for what is needed, before the actual building permit is issued. If this is the case, Transition Sooke might want to keep a careful eye on the rewriting of bylaws to do with building permits.

Summary of Council's Reception of the Presentation (begins 17:08 on the tape).

Councillors were sympathetic to the problem of delays, but some of their comments challenged the veracity of some of the assumptions in Haldane's presentation. Council initially welcomed the idea of a committee, but they expanded his suggestions for who should be on the committee, and they framed the committee in such a way that it would not become an ongoing committee focused on developers' concerns. However, in the discussion on the next item on the agenda, the report of the Chief Administrative Officer, Norm McInnis, the committee proposal seemed to be dropped. It is notable for Transition Sooke that Council welcomed the input of the community.

A few details about the discussion on council

- A preliminary detail that I found significant was that the sound cut out as Haldane's presentation began, and as it came back I heard someone say they should just proceed anyway, but Mayor Tait was clearly audible insisting that they take the time to fix the audio so that

members of the public watching at home to hear everything.

- Beddows said he worked on this problem with Haldane 3 years ago and was distressed to hear the problem had returned.
- Bateman expressed concern about the problem, suggesting a task force to address it quickly. He also listed ways that the problem was already being addressed, and further, he explained that Langford's time line may not be quite what it seemed since developers must first put together significant documents.
- Mayor Tait presented some explanations for why the timing has varied in the past.
- Concern about what the provincial government will do to direct municipalities to build homes was mentioned. Nathan Cullen is the new Minister responsible for local government.

Conclusion of the Issue

- The suggestion of a committee was dropped after McInnis responded strongly against the suggestion – 'we don't need to bring more people in'. He said that staff and council knew what the problems were (a bylaw that needed revision, a backlog because of staff shortages, and Sooke specific issues) and had a plan to work on them.
- Transition Sooke should be encouraged that the discussion included suggestions that would have the effect of broadening the focus from developers' concerns. First, council noted that it needed to be clear that it should not be a standing committee, but a short term one to address a limited problem. Second, it was suggested that members of the public be on the committee, and also members from the Land Use and Development committee (Pawlow & St-Pierre both suggested this).
- Nevertheless, Transition Sooke should be clear that council and staff were very concerned about the backlog and wanted to streamline the process of building permits (McInnis said that they were willing to work on 'knocking down the barriers where the risk is low').
- Haldane's confidence that his position reflects what is best for Sooke is very high. I did not have the impression that he saw himself as one of a number of possible stakeholders on the issue.

2. A bylaw amendment to encourage underground parking by allowing developers to have more units per hectare if they build parking underground. (Item 10.4 on the agenda, 1:24:09 on the tape; comments from Wallace and Belford are at 50:36, in Item 7, public comments)

The motions at this meeting were for first and second reading of the motion and to schedule a public hearing on the issue. William Wallace and Susan Belford both spoke against this.

Details of discussion

- Staff argue that we want an increase in density in the town core, and that underground parking allows for more green space, more amenity space, better views, less noise, and a more walkable town.
- Councillor St-Pierre argued that the bylaw would reduce emissions because it would increase density, reducing urban sprawl, leave more space for other uses, including green space. It would make better use of infrastructure, and increase pedestrian traffic, strengthening the local economy.
- Wallace pointed out the significant greenhouse gas implications for the very large amount of concrete that goes into underground parking.
- Belford reiterated these arguments and had a number of other suggestions - for example, decoupling the cost of parking and the cost of a unit and also facilitating car shares.

Conclusion and Significance for Transition Sooke

- St-Pierre's remarks are a pertinent alternative point of view.
- Belford's suggestions were well received by council, but did not change their approval of the amendment. Their response is that these are not the kinds of things that Council can do. This is a common perception - and is a barrier to the changes that Transition Sooke would like to help bring about.

The facts here are from my observation of the meeting (on YouTube) and the analysis is mine also.