

**Watchdog Report on Sooke Council Committee of the Whole Meeting
Committee of the Whole - 16 May 2022
Hester Vair for Watchdog Committee, Transition Sooke.**

Mayor Tait chairing the meeting. Also present: Councillors Al Beddows, Jeff Bateman, Megan McMath, Tony St-Pierre, Ebony Logins & Dana Lajeunesse.

Staff Present (voices that I heard & recognized): Interim CAO Chief Administrator Officer Don Schaffer, Matthew Pawlow, Director of Planning and Development

Notes:

- The YouTube recordings of Council now put the presentations on the screen and the picture of the councillors is minimized. This means that I can't always tell who is speaking because I don't have the visual of the body language.
- Reports of what councillors said are not 100% accurate because I can't catch it all in time; but they are not based on recall - they are written as the councillors are speaking.

This was the first of four meetings to review the draft Official Community Plan (OCP). The meeting was four hours long and for the most part councillors worked correcting errors and making suggestions for improvement. The bulk of this report will address the tension in the meeting and attempt to explain it.

There are two parts to this report - First on the discussion on form and style of the report, and second on some of the specific issues that might be of interest to Transition Sooke .

1. Does the Form and Style of the OCP Matter?

Style of the Document is Inaccessible to Average Resident

The major theme in this meeting was, on the surface, not about the substance of the OCP but its accuracy, style, and readability; there is an underlying theme here - differing ideas of what the OCP should be used for. But, first - the style of the document - the OCP document focuses on information and omits discussion of choices. It organizes the information into blocks that function to make it a useful reference on the District's land-use goals and policies. Lots of jargon is used and explanations are minimized. There is no narrative line that explains to a reader how one block of information is linked to another. This is a standard style of government report writing - it does tend to obscure the process of assigning goals and objectives to vision statements. The result is a document that is confusing for someone wanting a general understanding of what the District of Sooke is doing, and why.

All the councillors acknowledged the document was confusing at times, but opinions differed on whether this was a problem. A number of councillors were keen to edit it closely, while others felt it was not necessary to proceed carefully through the document ('nit picking' Logins said), because it already had the benefit of scrutiny by committees and staff. Logins argued that too much time was being taken on 'bizarre minutiae'.

Tait disagreed with Logins and said 'this is a draft, and as it went through the committies we were told that we would get the chance to have our say and make our input when we were presented with a draft - and here it is and this is what we are doing.' McMath was the most concerned, objecting strongly to the report-like explanation-lite style of the document and pushing for accessibility for all residents.

An example of the inaccessibility of the document is the presentation of the demographic information on housing and employment (p. 25 of the OCP). St-Pierre pointed out that the

presentation of the statistics in this section does not capture their significance for Sooke. Pawlow responded that the section was intended to be a factual overview of the statistics, with no interpretation. Tait, Bateman, and St-Pierre all objected to this bald overview of statistics and wished for a statement of what they meant about problems in Sooke. Pawlow defended the document suggesting that it is a matter of how they are reading it. I assume that as a document intended for staff and developers the interpretation is not necessary, but access to the statistics might be; as a document for the general resident, drawing out the significance of the statistics would make it more coherent.

Is the OCP an aspirational document to guide staff, or a plan for all Sookians?

The issue of the accessibility of the document is grounded in different notions of what the OCP is for. Staff presented it as an ‘aspirational’ document- which I understand means it states hopes and intentions, rather than a plan with specific objectives. (The term ‘aspirational’ was used by staff and adopted by Council in the discussion). It is intended to guide staff and inform developers and residents planning land use changes. An alternative view of the OCP is that it is a plan to guide the implementation of the vision that emerged in the public engagement process. It seemed that not all councillors saw the OCP in the same way that staff did - Bateman said he had come around to this view, but still argued for specific language in some places; Tait and St-Pierre sometimes made comments that implied they saw it, if not as a plan, as a document for all residents; McMath was fiercely opposed to seeing it as an aspirational document to guide staff.

A concrete example of the difference between these views of the OCP: if it is a plan, then one might expect it to specify measures about what could and could not be done, but, as an aspirational document, the standard for carbon emissions mentioned in the OCP is the provincial requirement, leaving the number at the minimum to make room for ‘updates’ and ‘changes’ rather than tying Sooke to the more specific figure of 50% already passed by Sooke Council. See below ‘Climate Change and the OCP’.

As a plan for all Sookians, one might also expect the process of going from public engagement and vision to goals and objectives to be made very transparent, but this is not the case for a document which is not expected to be a public read. McMath touches on this in her objections. She said that the OCP must be accessible to the average resident; assured that staff would be on hand to help, she remained firm that this was not good enough - “That is not what we are about here”. She began by speaking very strongly about the importance of making the document clear. She was agitated and worried and pointed out that since all present admitted to confusions with the way the material is presented it needs to be fixed. She said: “We likely have the best understanding in the community and we are struggling. Why is it written in this way? How do we fix this?” She asked Pawlow how the document evolved because she thought that the document sounded as if it might have emerged primarily from staff, and she saw this as a problem. All the councillors were sympathetic to her concerns, but missed the point she was concerned about - that the document did not emerge primarily from public engagement, but from the priorities of staff which may not be the same as residents. She was unimpressed with Pawlow’s assurances that staff would be there to help - the fact that the OCP needed staff to interpret it was a problem for her. She said that merely grasping the intent of the document “is not good enough. There are conflicts. Economic growth and climate change are both important goals. How do we balance them? I apologize, I have no solutions, but I wanted to voice those concerns.”. In short, McMath implied that a technical document removed decision-making about priorities, allowing them to become technical matters for staff with the end result that the priorities of Sooke are not laid out clearly.

Other councillors did not engage the concerns about conflicts she raised, nor the issue she implies that the OCP's inaccessibility might affect its implementation – but were sympathetic to her worries about the readability of the document. Bateman's response was a constructive attempt to focus on the task in a positive way – he read a section from the OCP about who uses the document (on page 17) where it is described as primarily a document for staff, and commented that “I think the key is no ambiguity. In the old one there were internal contradictions. Our job is to make sure there are no contradictions.”

Perhaps the issue is that some residents might also expect the OCP to be a different kind of document. The section before the section Bateman read, “What is an OCP, who is it for, and why is it important?”, could be taken to suggest something quite different than a technical planning document: “This Official Community Plan (OCP) is for everyone with a stake in Sooke's future. It is a plan for residents who own homes and those who rent them, as well as residents who do not yet have homes at all. This plan is for developers and business owners, and for employers and employees. This document is for everyone because it will shape Sooke in a way that touches the lives of all people, as well as the ecosystems of which we are a part.”

Who really is going to read it and use it?

Although there was agreement that the document would be read primarily by staff who can explain it to people (particularly developers), sometimes Tait, St-Pierre, and Bateman expressed concerns that there should be greater clarity about what was intended. The two outliers here were McMath and Logins - McMath thought the document should be easily accessible to Sooke residents so that engaged citizens would have a sense of Sooke and where it is going. Logins took the opposite position, saying that the document was by necessity a specialized document. Her phrase (which was taken up by all the others except McMath) was that people needed to ‘learn to learn how to read the document’.

What happens if people actually read it? ‘It is better to leave that out’

Discussions on how the average Sookian might read the document brought with it concerns about managing residents' expectations. This could be seen in the discussions about the inclusion or exclusion of specific details. Sometimes in the discussion, it was agreed that rather than providing more details, ‘it is better to say nothing’, and leave room for ‘things to evolve’, or be ‘updated as times change’. No doubt in a 10-year document there is a need to keep things flexible, but I wondered if this indicated the intention not to promise too much in the OCP which might open staff and Council to accusations of broken promises.

At some points the discussion touched on the idea, but did not explicitly discuss, that residents might be unhappy with the translation of vision to the practical goals, objectives, and policies (which is unexplained in the OCP, as is normal in these kinds of documents). Some residents may see the vision of Sooke discussed in the public engagement process as a clear indication of Sooke's direction. For example, the desire to have public waterfront and affordable housing both emerged as priorities for residents, but neither of these may be attainable. Other parts of the vision, such as a commitment to climate change and ecological responsibility are in tension with goals of economic growth and so will be implemented as future councils see fit.

With this open, ‘aspirational’ tone the OCP draft made room for a future reality less progressive than the vision and goal areas seem to be describing. This is most obvious in the sections about climate change. Bateman pointed out where the significance of Sooke's commitment to address climate change was underplayed in the document.

2. Beyond Style - Issues pertinent to Transition Sooke

Climate Change in the OCP - avoid being explicit and avoid too much explanation

Bateman asked a number of questions that I think were aimed at making sure the OCP mentioned Council's resolution on carbon emissions, but he also indicated that he understood why the document was written as it was. He said that initially he was concerned that the OCP did not state categorically that Sooke is concerned about climate change since 'the district has declared a climate change emergency'. But, "my thinking has been changed in conversations with you. My new thinking on this, educated by the rest of you is that we need to keep this (document) tight".

Bateman asked that the information on climate change use language that is a stronger - at least as strong as is used by the CRD, placing more emphasis on the urgency of climate change. (OCP reference: p. 24 under heading 'Impact of Climate Change', in the section Community Context.)

Bateman has had queries about what 'Net Zero' means and suggested expanding the definition on page 41 and use the word 'sequestration', and perhaps amending the document to use a UN definition that is more specific. (OCP reference p. 41-43 in the section 2.2 Journey to a net-zero emissions community)

The OCP does not state the 50% emissions reduction target that Council adopted upon the recommendation of the Climate Action Committee; it states the provincial goal of 40% emissions reductions. Bateman said he initially objected to the fact that the OCP does not reflect the goal of a 50% reduction in emissions that was passed by Council, and that he now understands that the OCP is an aspirational document, with the 50% reduction as a specific plan under the more general OCP – but – he nevertheless would like to see the inclusion of a statement of intent in Sooke to work towards a 7% solution to a 50% reduction. St-Pierre said that unlike Bateman, he still did not understand why the higher goal was left out of what is supposed to be an aspirational document. Pawlow's explanation was that the minimum (the provincial requirements) was the goal stated in the OCP, but that we may do better because of our 7% solution. Tait and Lajeunesse both said it was more appropriate to use the provincial requirement because Sooke's own 50% was a more specific goal which 'might be updated', however, the OCP should contain a link to the Climate Action Committee's document with Sooke's higher goal. In the discussion Bateman requested that a paragraph be included with Pawlow's explanation for the lower target - "We need to be sure that it is clear that the work of the climate action committee's work is respected." Tait agreed, but Pawlow, Logins and Lajeunesse were less clear in their response, mentioning the length of the document, the adequacy of a link to the climate action report, and the need to be flexible. I conclude that they are worried about making specific promises in the OCP.

Bateman commented on the statement in the OCP, 'Create civic infrastructure and landscaping that is both high performing and delightful', asking how 'hi-performing infrastructure' is defined and if this could be added to the glossary. Pawlow responded that his memory was that it was about 'durability, visual appeal of the infrastructure, and fitting in with scale'. Tait said to leave it alone and not put it in the glossary. No discussion of why, but I assume it is the potential for problems with specifics in the OCP. (OCP reference p. 44 in section 2.3 Goals, goal area 1: Green & Net Zero)

Bateman asked why 'protecting green space' was mentioned, but the term 'carbon sink' (which is in the glossary), was omitted. This led to the following exchanges which I thought an amusing reflection of the gentle tension on Council regarding who uses/reads the OCP: Beddows remarked, "but the public may not know what a carbon sink is." and Bateman responds "that is why it is in the glossary." Shortly afterwards Tait read the definition in the glossary and suggests it be left out.

When La-Pierre remarked that the public will need an explanation, Tait responded (somewhat contradictory to previous statements) “The general public won’t be reading it. It is a land use document.”

A Discussion on Growth - better to say nothing

Bateman initiated a short discussion on growth. Residents have asked how the district controls growth, and since that it appears the district has no control over growth, how does it monitor growth? Both Tait and Beddows responded to the issue of controlling growth. Tait said she did not think we could control growth, “nor should we - no government should have that power”. Beddows said that he was aware that some people wanted them to turn off growth, but that “it can’t be done”, so it is important “to get the message across that there will be a lot of growth in Sooke and the pressures that come with it.” St-Pierre agreed that growth could not be controlled but pointed out that it could be contained by the zoning of both green space and zoning of high density housing. Bateman asked for a statement to be added to the OCP which made it clear what the District’s ability and responsibility was regarding growth. He wanted it to be clear that councils have the right to make policies which affect the pace of growth. This was not adopted - another illustration of the ‘better to leave that out’. Beddows said that section in the OCP contained “simple demographic reporting, not a statement that we are pro growth. Lets just clean up the language and leave it.” (*OCP reference . Page 25 under heading ‘Population and Demographics’.*)

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