

August 6, 2019

Dear Mayor & Council:

Subject: Improving community relations and public trust.

The recent instance of vandalism that names West Vancouver's mayor and council is abhorrent. District Communications Manager Donna Powers was quoted as saying that the tenor of public discourse has been declining and abuse towards public officials has been escalating for some time, all over.

I agree public discourse in our community has been toxic for some time and public officials are not the only targets. Toxic and intimidating behaviour seems to know no bounds and sadly even some of our public servants have been perpetrators.

Though of course acts of vandalism like this are never justifiable, it is an unfortunate response when people feel disregarded, powerless and belittled - so it may well continue to get worse.

Normally, jaded residents have tended to disengage. After a while most people just get fed up and quit, which makes this repugnant act all the more startling. What would provoke such behaviour? I believe it stems from chronic disillusionment in the community about how the District fails to find acceptable options for developer and neighbourhood alike. Every development proposal becomes a zero-sum game in which one side wins and one loses. You're either for or against; pro-development or a NIMBY; progressive and forward-thinking or negative and afraid of change. Instead of extolling the virtues of a particular position or trying to find common ground and consensus, debate devolves into attacking not only opposing points of view, but those who hold a different point of view.

This entrenchment of "sides" is compounded by a flawed public engagement process that fails to accurately reflect community sentiment. Rather than start from a position neutrality with no preferred outcome in mind, engagement has become an exercise in managed consent.

Combative, biased advocacy undermines public confidence and leads to polarization and hostility. To break this, we must adopt an attitude of respect, objectivity and fairmindedness *towards people we disagree with*.

There are a number of quick fixes the District could do that would go a long way to improving community relations and building public trust. For instance:

1. Correspondence asking for information should be answered in a timely manner. (I am aware of letters from 2018 with replies still pending.) And when the District does respond, it must be with substance, not some "brush-off" reply that requires multiple follow-ups to nail down something that remotely addresses the question.
2. The number of "in-camera" meetings could be reduced. There has been an alarming escalation of these closed-door events. When they do occur a very general agenda could be released (for example, legal matters - Brissenden Park, Staffing issues, etc.). Further, when the confidential aspect has passed (i.e. a legal matter has been resolved) minutes could then be released.
3. Minutes from Committee meetings should capture actual dialogue and substance, not a sanitized version edited beyond recognition.
4. Questions arising at Council meetings during public comment and question period could be treated as official correspondence. A transcript of them could become part of public record, and ideally, answers to questions provided at a subsequent meeting.

5. Follow the City of Surrey's lead and hire an Ethics Commissioner and institute a lobbyist registry (phone call, letter and visitor logs) that provides an account of who's contacting the District, how often and regarding what topic.
6. Encourage and facilitate sharing of information rather than controlling and restricting it. For example, changes to the District's online survey platform (Westvancouverite) prevents users from viewing others survey responses and makes it difficult to edit or change ones' own response or see results of past surveys – all of which were possible and easy to do with the original version.
7. Stop redacting public correspondence to Mayor & Council. Take a page from the City of Burnaby where all correspondence submitted to the City forms part of the public record and is published, along with the author's address, which the City of Burnaby considers relevant to Council's consideration. At the very least, revert to the District's previous policy of only redacting if the writer requests so.
8. Reinstate the practice of requesting speakers at Council meetings provide their name and address for public record. (The Mayor can't make someone provide this, but you can at least ask. You can also prevent someone from speaking if they choose not to give this most basic of information.)

It is my sincere wish that instead of filing this letter as "Received for information", Mayor and Council will implement these simple changes – it would be a good start to improving transparency and public confidence in our local government.

Yours truly,

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(Please do NOT redact any part of this letter.)