

July 5, 2021

Re: Proposed Respectful Communication Bylaw 5141, 2021 appearing on the agenda for the July 12, 2021 Council Meeting.

Dear Mayor & Council,

I am appalled by this proposed bylaw, which says is intended to *promote a safe, healthy, respectful and positive environment for members of the public, staff and Council*, but would more accurately be described as a measure to muzzle public discourse by allowing staff to ignore and suppress inquiries that make them feel uncomfortable!

I am appalled that such a bylaw would even be suggested. While no-one should be subject to abusive behaviour (and to that end, surely the District already has adequate policies and procedures in place), certainly anyone in public service must expect to deal with difficult inquiries or unhappy citizens from time to time. This may be vexing, but it is part of the job.

It is hard to imagine that there are so many instances of seriously disrespectful communications that a bylaw is required to protect District staff. If this is indeed the case, it suggests there is a much larger underlying problem that needs to be addressed.

- **Kindly elaborate on these instances of inappropriate communication (*that staff have experienced in increasing frequency*) and provide some examples so we may have a better understanding of what staff are dealing with and what is deemed inappropriate.**

While some of our public servants (both elected officials and staff) are solicitous, I have been the recipient of disrespectful and offensive communications from District representatives on multiple occasions. For example, I have been falsely accused of misquoting a Councillor and threatened with libel. The correspondence would well be described as intimidating and humiliating, not to mention unfounded. (The correspondence is part of public record and I am happy to provide a copy to anyone who wishes to peruse it and judge for themselves). And I have had so many disrespectful and offensive emails from Councillor Cameron that I have ceased communicating with him, as to continue to do so is akin to perpetuating an abusive relationship. I know of residents who are too intimidated to speak up and will no longer address Mayor and Council because they are fearful of rebuke, including threats of libel.

I also know of residents who are afraid to raise concerns with District staff as they fear repercussions. I initially dismissed such fear as paranoia until I experienced a series of unpleasant incidences, including being the only home on my block that did not receive a temporary water shut off notice. This happened twice after I raised concerns about lack of consultation on road work in my neighbourhood. Coincidence? Perhaps, but around the same time, someone at the District also spread false rumours that my “uninsured” vehicle had been parked in front of my home, so I now understand why some residents would feel intimidated by District staff.

The guidelines defining what constitutes inappropriate communication are subjective, allowing staff not to respond to or publish future correspondence from anyone deemed to engage in communications that are *vexatious or frivolous* or that may cause the subject and/or recipient to *feel humiliated or intimidated*.

Yet not responding to inquiries is already a common occurrence – so common that it seems to be a deliberate strategy to discourage questions (along with not replying in a timely manner and/or replying with an answer that is not relevant to the question). My most recent correspondence with the District regarding a new Arts Centre is a classic example...

- I never received a reply to an inquiry submitted June 16;
- I sent another inquiry June 24 and received a reply, which raised more questions;
- I sent additional questions June 28 and received the identical reply as had already been provided to my initial inquiry, which did not address the new questions posed;
- I sent a follow-up June 29 and to date I have not heard anything further. I expect I never will.

This is but one example and I can provide others. Now I wonder...

- **Was my recent correspondence about the Arts Centre deemed to be *intimidating, humiliating* and/or part of a *pattern of communications that are frivolous or vexatious*?**
- **If this bylaw is implemented, will residents be notified when they are deliberately not receiving a reply? Otherwise, how will one know when a “non-reply” is due to the bylaw or because of another reason, such as the query was misplaced or the District is simply late in responding?**
- **If one doesn’t hear back and then follows-up, will this be deemed a *pattern of communication that is frivolous or vexatious*?**

A lot of time and expense has gone into creating policies to protect staff and elected officials from the public, but no thought to protecting citizens from abuse or intimidation from our public servants.

- **How about conducting an annual Local Government Performance review asking citizens about their satisfaction with the overall performance of staff and Council?**
- **How about implementing communication and service standards to ensure citizens receive an appropriate reply in a timely manner?**

I respectfully suggest public servants who do not wish to deal with “*frivolous or vexatious*” communications from the public, or who are not comfortable dealing with pointed questions or disgruntled residents, may be better suited to another line of work.

Discouraging or hindering residents from communicating with Council and District staff is a form of censorship and an erosion of democracy. It is my sincere wish that Mayor and Council recognize the danger of implementing a policy that would do just that, and register their strong objection to this proposed bylaw.

Sincerely,

Melinda Slater
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West Vancouver

Please do not redact any portion of this correspondence.

(Note – **bold** font used to distinguish questions to which a reply is kindly requested).