

District of Sechelt

"Heart of the Sunshine Coast"

March 17, 2003

Sandy Hook Community Association

5916 Skookumchuk Road

Sechelt, BC VON 3A4

RE: Liaison meeting for Council and Community Groups

I am writing to invite you to a meeting about Council's objective to expand its contact with groups and organizations in the community. The new Council wants to hold regular open house liaison meetings with community groups to obtain thoughts and comments about issues of importance to community groups.

As a first step, Council asked staff to prepare a report outlining how this initiative would operate. I have attached a copy of that report to this letter for you. The report presents suggestions in three areas:

- Inviting a broad cross section of groups and organizations in the community to meet with Council.
- Establishing criteria about level of representation for groups to provide 'official' comments about development applications received by the District of Sechelt.
- Creating accountability criteria for receiving financial assistance from the District for newsletter printing.

The first meeting we are scheduling is for the evening of Wednesday, March 26, 2003 at 7:00 PM. The meeting will be held at Greene Court Recreation Hall, 5583 Ocean Avenue, Sechelt. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on best ways for Council to seek input from groups in our community.

Yours truly,

DISTRICT OF SECHELT

Cameron Reid,

Mayor

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REPORT

DATE: March 17, 2003

TO: Recreation, Culture and Community Relations Committee

FROM: Administrator

RE: Community Relations Policy

1. **BACKGROUND**

Generally speaking, the purpose neighbourhood associations have set for themselves is to enhance the livability of their neighbourhoods. One way they work to achieve this is through lobbying for public

improvements to be constructed in their neighborhoods, involvement in planning, presenting neighbourhood opinion and providing comments and input regarding on development applications.

Over the years, Sechelt District Council has expanded the focus on community involvement, actively seeking comment and input from community groups in the District in order to assist them with decision making. This relationship with community groups has continued to grow on an incremental basis over the past few years.

In an historical context, the District's relationship with Neighbourhood Associations was formalized by former Mayor Basse. Before that time, resident associations did exist in District neighborhoods, and prior to incorporation, in some of the rural neighborhoods; however, their relationship with previous Councils and the Regional Board was informal and issue specific.

The role of community associations has grown over the years, and the District now recognizes eight community associations. The District circulates development applications to these associations for their comment, and photocopies their newsletters.

Recently, questions have been raised about the exact role the District expects the community associations to serve and, the validity of the mechanisms that they use to gather and represent interests of residents in their respective neighbourhoods.

Specific questions have recently been raised regarding the following issues:

- o Are the Advisory Committee functions being duplicated?
- o What is the distinction between giving advice and relaying opinions and lobbying?
- o What role should community associations have regarding building and park projects?
- o Do Community Associations have the level of skill and ability to collect and present the views of all neighbourhood residents?
- o Should the District be selective regarding which District operations and Council policy decisions require input to be solicited?

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- o Is it time for the District Council to engage a broader range of organizations than those currently relied on for consultation?

These questions have lead the District Council to request staff to examine the procedures followed by other municipalities regarding relationships with groups in their communities and, provide suggestions for Council's consideration.

2. ALTERNATIVES

Suggested Community Involvement policy direction alternatives include:

- Clearly define areas/issues for which the District is seeking comment
- Expand the number of organizations formally recognized by the District and reiterate that individual citizen input is also valued
- Establish clear performance standards required for formal recognition of organizations
- Set clear terms of reference for groups, outlining their roles and responsibilities when collaborating in projects.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

No direct grant funding is provided to local groups at this time. However, the District does provide photocopying services for newsletters for eight community associations. Recognizing that some neighbourhoods have a greater number of residents than others, it is suggested that allocation of printing be done on a per-capita basis.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The District has a history of meaningful engagement with its citizens. Staff recommends that this practice continue and that the focus be placed on changes and improvements to the process.

The following criteria were used to prepare the recommendations of this report:

- Equitable treatment for all groups,
- Establishing simple, clear and measurable standards for accountability.

5. DISCUSSION

There currently exists expectations on the part of some individuals within the neighbourhood associations that their role is to participate in the actual decision making with Council. Staff recommends that clearly communicating that the District is seeking their input by way of comments and suggestions would help manage the groups' expectations, and minimize disagreement regarding their level of involvement.

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There are operational processes and some decisions for which the District will not seek direct input from community association(s), e.g. legal matters.

It is recommended that Council reaffirm its practice of seeking input by way of circulating requests for comments. Using this approach, rather than identifying a set list of policy matters for which input would be considered, will give Council the flexibility to seek input about a wide range of topics not previously encountered, if they so desire. Councillors will need to clarify, in their own minds, which policy matters would benefit most directly from community input.

Currently the District circulates requests for comment to neighbourhood groups when Council is making a policy decision, e.g. development applications. This is done early in the decision making process. These comments are considered and incorporated into subsequent work. As the decision process proceeds; individual comments proposed may be carried forward, discarded, or incorporated in larger elements of projects.

There have been cor that neighbourhood associations should be notified of changes to the budget or projects of interest to them, as such items proceed through the approval process. These groups need to be reminded regularly that agendas and minutes of meetings are posted on the District website and are provided to community groups in order to keep citizens aware of items of particular interest to them.

There is a concurrent responsibility on the part of interested individuals and groups to keep informed regarding items of interest to them and respond accordingly. Comments regarding development applications are solicited from neighbourhood groups, as is a recommendation from the District's Advisory Planning Commission. There is an overlap between the two. This has raised the question whether the District's public involvement process is leading to duplication and contradiction of the APC advice. Staff advises that this overlap is beneficial as it provides Council with a broader range of perspective for consideration.

Individuals have voiced concerns that the neighbourhood association in their neighbourhood is not open to their input. Establishing performance standards tied to recognition of community organizations is recommended to address this concern. Evidence of seeking community input in a pre-determined way, in a way where the playing field is level for all, would act as "proof of good faith" and meet District standards.

Suggested criteria to ascertain if a group represents the opinion of residents are;

- have a minimum of 25% of the households in the neighbourhood as members,
- make the list of members of the organization available to the public,
- publicize and hold at least four open meetings each year, and
- publish and distribute a newsletter of association activities, and use the newsletter to actively solicit input from neighbourhood residents, regardless of membership in the association.

One of the issues for the District is how to distinguish between advice-giving and lobbying. The distinction is difficult to define. A community/neighbourhood groups' focus is their own area. Their mandate is one of promoting their group or neighbourhood's particular interest. Having a

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broader range of groups providing input to the District will assist in generating more balanced opinions.

Furthermore, staff recommends that Council modify its meeting arrangements with the 'G8' community associations to include other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, and the Seniors Society who also represent constituency interests. These meetings should be restructured as 'community advisory group(s)' meetings to reflect their purpose which is clearly understood to be a free exchange of information.

District staff has been working to increase neighbourhood involvement in developing and maintaining local parks and beach accesses. This involvement can help make the facilities more a part of the community, protecting it and keeping costs manageable. At the same time, the District has to be mindful of its insurance requirements, and prevent 'run-away' projects that exceed financial resources.

Setting clear terms of reference for neighbourhood groups' responsibility to collaborate in projects is required. For projects where a neighbourhood group is assisting the District, that assistance will be restricted to certain criteria that have been approved by Council. Staff recommends that a single contribution be made to projects sponsored by community groups, seeking District support for their project. It is very awkward for the District to be involved in building or recreation facility projects, where progress is delayed, while waiting for a neighbourhood group's schedules to complete their work.

There will be some major issues and projects that will need their own expanded public involvement process, beyond the normal procedure of circulating requests for comment by community groups. Examples include:

- Exploring issues that affect everyone, or all aspects of the community,
- Official Community Plan review and update,
- Significant policy decision that will have District wide impact.

The District's liaison with community groups must not exclude citizens who choose to make individual presentations to Council. Individual input is still an important element of community input.

At this time, the District uses a variety of public involvement tools to engage its citizens. These include:

- Council delegations
- Formal public meetings and hearings
- Informal meetings and open house drop in sessions
- The annual budget process
- Variance Hearing process for building hardship cases
- Local improvement petition process (e.g. paving, sidewalks and street lights)
- Neighbourhood Planning and Official Plan advisory committees
- Park Design Planning, involving neighbours

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6. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council restructure its meeting arrangements with the “G8” community associations as ‘community advisory group(s)’ meetings to include other groups.

That Council adopt the following criteria to ascertain if a group represents the opinion of residents:

- **have a minimum of 25% of the households in the neighbourhood as members,**
- **make the list of members of the organization available to the public,**
- **publicize and hold at least four open meetings each year, and**
- **publish and distribute a newsletter of association activities, and use the newsletter to actively solicit input neighbourhood residents, regardless of membership in the association.**

That allocating of photocopying for community associations be done on a per capita basis.

That community associations be reminded that there is a concurrent responsibility on the part of the interested groups and individuals to stay informed regarding items of interest to them.

That for building and recreation projects where a neighbourhood group is assisting the District, that assistance will be restricted to work approved by Council.

That a single contribution be made to projects sponsored by community groups, without subsequent District involvement in their project.

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