

Considered at the February 12, 2019, Regular Council meeting

Council Agenda Information

☒ Regular Council February 12, 2019

Item 9.5



City of Port Moody Report/Recommendation to Council

Date: January 27, 2019

File No. 01-0530-01/2019

Submitted by: Councillor Diana Dilworth

Subject: Transparency and Accountability: Holding of Committee Meetings in Council Chambers

Purpose / Introduction

To introduce a motion for consideration that would result in the Finance Committee, Committee of the Whole, and Community Planning Advisory Committee being returned to being held in Council Chambers, further resulting in a return to the level of transparency, accountability, and resident engagement that was previously established by Council and expected by our community.

Recommended Resolutions

WHEREAS the requirement to hold Finance Committee in the Council Chambers, with video-recording, live-streaming, and archival video, was made by motion of Council on October 24, 2017;

AND WHEREAS Finance Committee meetings, Committee of the Whole meetings, and most recently, Community Planning Advisory Committee meetings, are no longer being held in the Council Chamber, recorded, live-streamed, or video archived;

BE IT RESOLVED THAT per resolution RC17/431, that the Finance Committee meetings continue to be held in Council Chambers, be video-recorded, live-streamed, and archived;

AND THAT Committee of the Whole meetings and Community Planning Advisory Committee meetings be returned to being held in Council Chambers, be video-recorded, live-streamed, and archived.

Background

Every Regular Council Meeting has been held in the Council Chambers and video-taped for the purpose of live-stream and video-archiving since a motion of Council mandated it in September 2012 (with the exception of when meetings were held in community centres in the City).

Committee of the Whole meetings were relocated from the Brovold Room to the Council Chambers, with video-taping undertaken at the same time in September 2012.

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In October 2017, Council unanimously approved a motion to relocate the meetings of the Finance Committee to the Council Chamber for the year 2018.

In 2014, a select number of meetings of the Land Use Committee (subsequently renamed the Community Planning Advisory Committee) were relocated to the Council Chambers due to resident interest and an increased number of those residents attending the meeting in-person. In 2015, a permanent move to the Council Chambers occurred.

For further reference, the Council Code of Conduct signed by each member of Council is committed to public business being conducted in a fair, honest, and open manner, with a further commitment to “strive to keep the decision making processes open, accessible, participatory, understandable, timely, just, and fair.

In November 2017, after the Inaugural Meeting of Council, the Committee of the Whole and Finance Committee meetings were re-located to be held in the Brovold Room, without any apparent consultation with members of Council or with the community.

Discussion

Public Viewing of Committee Meetings

The statistics provided by staff indicate that, in 2018, on average, the Finance Committee has been watched live by 34 persons, and through archived video by 274 persons.

Statistics provided by staff indicate that, in 2018, on average, the Committee of the Whole has been watched live by 30 persons, and through archived video by 195 persons.

Statistics provided by staff indicate that, in 2018, on average, the Community Planning Advisory Committee has been watched by 33 persons and through archived video by 43 persons.

The facts support the notion that since there were three dozen or 300 people accessing the video, it is a valued activity by some residents of the community and should not have been arbitrarily changed without any consultation.

The relocation of the meetings to the Brovold Room meant that those meetings were no longer as accessible to members of the public as they once were. This City has now taken a step back in its level of transparency to members of the public who wish to follow council proceedings from the leisure of their home, and at their convenience.

The live-streaming and video-archiving, which allowed residents to watch the meetings while they were occurring, or at their own convenience at a later time, was an initiative that Council took that was appreciated by the community, and taken advantage of by potentially hundreds of residents.

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Transparency and Accountability

Without actual audio-visual coverage of any meeting, residents are left with either attending a committee meeting in-person or relying on the meeting minutes to determine what the end result of any discussion was. While meeting minutes provide the outcome of agenda items, the minutes in no way provide the perspective of individual councillors, the content of staff presentations, the context of debate and the rationale behind decisions being made.

Given that Council is often making decisions in the millions of dollars at Finance Committee meetings, it behooves elected officials to ensure the highest level of transparency and accountability by ensuring that residents are aware of how and why those decisions were made, and how taxpayer dollars are being spent.

Community Planning Advisory Committee is often the first public opportunity for residents to review development applications and understand what proposals are being made. To not allow the sharing of this information via live-stream or video-archives may leave residents with the idea that information is deliberately being dealt with "behind closed doors".

With meetings no longer being video-recorded, there now exists a vacuum of information for residents in understanding the rationale behind why and how certain decisions are being made.

Residents are now asking why meetings that have, in some cases, been held in Council Chambers for years, are now being moved to a meeting room that has no capacity for audio-visual recording and potentially not enough room for residents to watch in-person.

Accessibility to the Decision-Making Process

It is questionable as to why the hosting of meetings in Council Chambers as an aspect of transparency and accountability is being changed at this time.

The Committee of the Whole meetings and Community Planning Advisory Committee often have dozens of attendees in person and dozens more watching via live-stream and up to a hundred watching after the fact. If we were to assume that these residents would now come to City Hall to watch the meetings in person, there would literally be no room in the Brovold Room to accommodate them and, by default, those meetings may have to be relocated back to Council Chamber to accommodate the audience.

Additionally, in the case of the Finance Committee, those meetings are being held at 4pm on a Tuesday afternoon, which is a barrier for many in our community to attend. In reviewing the statistics of how many people are watching live-stream or accessing the video-archive, it is apparent that our residents value the opportunity to follow the decision-making process of their Council.

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Other Options

1. Maintain the new recent practice of holding the above-identified committees in the Brovold Room, without video-recording, live-streaming, or video archival.
2. Relocate all, or any of, the above-identified committees, back to the Council Chambers with video-recording, live-streaming, and video archival.

Financial Implications

The previous practice of hosting special meetings and a select number of committee meetings in the Council Chamber was an operational cost that was enshrined within the City's budget.

The cost savings of relocating these meetings to the Brovold (or any other meeting room) would be minimal and would be related to the need for a technician to be available for those meetings which traditionally last for between one and three hours. The same staff members are expected to attend these meetings, whether they are in the Council Chamber or a meeting room.

It has been suggested that the Brovold Room could be outfitted with an audio-visual recording system, similar to what exists in the Council Chambers. The question is whether a financial investment made to duplicate the audio-visual recording systems in two different locations in the City Hall is a necessary, or fiscally-responsible one? It would be a questionable expenditure to outfit a committee room with a recording system, when there is already one in place in the City facility.

To maintain the process of holding the above-identified committees in the Council Chamber would not incur the City any additional costs. To relocate the committees to the Brovold Room might save the cost of a technical support person, but it would be at the expense of financial accountability and transparency, which in my mind, is priceless.

Communications / Civic Engagement

Although the location of some of the committee meetings were made by a motion of Council, it appears that the relocation of these meetings to a small meeting room, on the third floor of City Hall, was an arbitrary one made by the Mayor. There was no apparent consultation with all members of council, or with members of the public.

The arbitrary decisions came as a surprise to many in the community, particularly those that regularly observe committee meetings, either by attending in person or by watching the live-stream.

If the new practice of holding meetings in a boardroom, without benefit of audio-visual recording, is to continue, it may be of benefit to obtain public feedback on this significant change to the level of transparency and accountability that our residents have come to expect.

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Council Strategic Plan Objectives

In the most recent Strategic Plan, approved by five of the current members of Council, the following values were embraced:

- Respect for our citizens, stakeholders, employees, and partners; and
- Building relationships through transparency and integrity

In fact, one of the seven pillars enshrined in the Strategic Plan was one of Service Excellence, with the stated commitment to “development responsive and sustainable service excellence, community engagement and a culture of transparency.”

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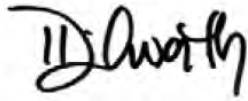
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