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City of North Vancouver's cap on public input questioned

Justin Beddall / North Shore News

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file photo Cindy Goodman, North Shore News

There's a line forming at the sign-up sheet for the public input period at City of North Vancouver council meetings.

Last summer, after contemplating eliminating the input period, council instead tweaked the rules governing the public session, capping the number of speakers allowed at five. Previously, there was no limit to the number of residents who could register to share their opinions with council.

The new council procedures bylaw does allow for more than five speakers to have their turn at the mic but any extra speakers now require a unanimous vote by council.

Since the introduction of the new rules on June 15 there haven't been more than five speakers sign up to make submissions to council – that was until the Jan. 11 meeting.

When the sixth speaker approached the table he was informed there wouldn't be added public input. The motion to hear all speakers on the list was moved by Coun. Don Bell and seconded by Coun. Rod Clark but it didn't receive unanimous council support.

The sixth speaker on the list, Kerry Morris, who ran for mayor in the last municipal election, said he was "shocked" that he wasn't allowed his turn.

"In all the years that I've gone to council, it has never once declined any speaker even when the speaker is speaking off-topic," he said. "The topic for my discussion on Monday night was to highlight the fact that my own home property assessment had arrived and I had experienced a massive increase. I come to council as a resident because I have an entitlement to have my opinion heard in a venue where I can speak directly to the people whose votes will affect my life and spend my money."

This Monday, when the sign-up sheet was put out 30 minutes prior to the start of the council meeting a line quickly

formed and 15 speakers signed up.

But only five got a chance to speak because again there wasn't unanimous support.

Coun. Clark requested a recorded vote and he and Coun. Pam Bookham voted in favour of added speakers, while Mayor Darrell Mussatto and councillors Holly Back, Linda Buchanan, and Craig Keating voted against it (Coun. Don Bell was absent).

Ivan Leonard was the ninth speaker on Monday's list.

The Lower Lonsdale resident wanted to make some supportive comments about the new museum planned for the Shipyards.

"Why was I refused an opportunity to read this at the public input period?" he wrote in a note to the North Shore News. "There was no warning this would happen. This has never happened before."

During the new items of business portion at the end of the regular meeting, Bookham revisited the topic of public input.

"This is the second week in a row this has happened and prior to last week, to my knowledge, we have never denied anybody the opportunity to use the public opinion period," she said.

"I guess I'm asking the four that did not wish to go beyond five (speakers) is that their intention going forward that from now on we will only hear from five speakers?"

Bookham mused that if that was the case they could have "fistfights in the corridor" at the sign-up sheet. "So could I have response from council: is it their intention to limit the public input period to five speakers only?"

Mussatto said he would not allow that type of questioning. "I will respond on behalf of the bylaw we have in place, which basically says that **in order to hear more than five speakers it has to be unanimous.**"

Bookham, acknowledging her understanding of the new bylaw, said she was trying to understand "the principles on which those votes took place. So, whether it's a case of in order to make our council meetings more efficient..."

Mussatto suggested she could directly contact her fellow council members, "but it's not something we are going to discuss at the council table in that fashion."

"Fine. I'll do that but I think people -- the public -- might have an interest in whether or not we have a new policy in place," said Bookham.

The District of North Vancouver allows a 30-minute public input period with speakers being given three minutes to talk on an item of interest. In West Vancouver, attendees may address council on agenda items by signing up on the speakers' list. At the end of the regular council meetings there is a public questions and comments period that gives people three minutes to address council.

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