

# Every city could use a revamp

**Core reviews:** Nanaimo is the latest to look for efficiencies, despite the constant opposition of CUPE

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN



City bureaucracies are a bit like junk drawers; they need a good purging every once in a while. Over time, politicians and their staff create new programs and red tape and entrench spending on things that need to be rethought or scrapped, given time and the plight of the overburdened taxpayer.

That's why core reviews have gained popularity across the province, as city councils try to find ways to deliver services more efficiently and leave businesses they don't belong in. The modern wave started with Penticton, and more than a dozen B.C. cities have done core reviews since.

Nanaimo is the latest council to jump in, and as it prepares for the review, the Harbour City would do well to remember the lessons of Penticton and Prince George and a few wise words from former B.C. finance minister Gary Collins.

Penticton's review was a major success and is still the gold standard for what can be accomplished. Facing a potential 7.8-per-cent tax increase in 2010, then-mayor Dan Ashton and his council ordered the review. "We had to change the culture of city hall, because we had forgotten who our customers were. Our customers are taxpayers," Ashton was quoted by The Taxpayer magazine in 2012. "We knew we had to get costs down."

Ashton cited council unity as a key driver to cutting costs, delivering a three-year property tax



Nanaimo is preparing to be the next B.C. city to undergo a core review of its operations.

ROB KRUYT/PNG FILE

freeze, scrapping management raises, slicing superfluous positions and negotiating a contract that cut starting wages by \$5 per hour. "The cuts came all over the place," said Ashton. "We had to improve our efficiency and productivity."

Penticton's success came because the council stuck together. No one gave into the temptation to try to score cheap political points by pandering to unions or other special-interest groups.

The same can't be same for Prince George, which went through a core review two years later. It wasn't nearly so positive, as council unity fell apart under pressure from CUPE, the municipal union.

CUPE battled Prince George every step of the way, coming as a delegation to council several times to belittle the process, refusing to allow members to participate, and meeting councillors individually to remind them that an election was coming.

It worked. While the Prince George council delivered a two-year, net-zero contract with CUPE — a significant achievement after 28 straight years of raises — CUPE's scare tactics managed to peel off enough councillors to render the rest of the review ineffective.

"The union executive was against it from the beginning [which] was unfortunate because many of their members were teeming with enthusiasm and ideas they wanted to share.

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Instead, they were silenced; real tools that staff needed were given up on for politics," former mayor Shari Green, who didn't seek re-election after the Prince George review, said to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. "If you do not have a majority of council with courage and fortitude, this process will not work."

One last piece of advice for Nanaimo, from Collins, who led B.C. through a core review in 2001. Collins and his colleagues looked at everything government did and asked three questions: What is government's business? How are we going to do it and how can we do it better?

Those three questions should frame every core review. Does the city need to provide this specific service, or can it be delivered by another business or organization? If Nanaimo must do it, is the best possible delivery model being used? Or can it be done better?

Core reviews can be bumpy. But if Nanaimo council is willing to stick together, adhere to their agreed-on principles, find cost savings and challenge the status quo, property taxpayers will be better off.

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