



Isn't it time to elect full-time directors in Metro Vancouver?

Fewer directors devoting their full attention to the task might be more valuable than paying part-timers nearly \$1 million a year

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN? MAY 18, 2011

It's one of the best part-time jobs in the province ... maybe even the country.

It's highly influential, well paid with good perks (including international travel) and there's no accountability to anyone.

The job? Director of Metro Vancouver, with responsibility for a budget this year of \$607.5 million and a chance to shape regional growth for the next 30 years.

How do you apply? You can't.

The easiest way is to win the only directly elected seat, representing the University Endowment Lands, University of British Columbia Area, Bowyer, Passage and Barnston islands, Grebe Islets and all of the unincorporated areas of Howe Sound, Indian Arm and West Pitt Lake.

Maria Harris won in 2008 with a grand total of 219 votes. In 2009 -the most recent year for which data are available -Harris earned \$20,835 from Metro and had \$1,331 of travel expenses.

But she's the exception. Every other director has to first win a seat on their local council. Of course, in a surprisingly large number of municipalities, that only means filing nomination papers since the council and mayoralty positions are uncontested.

Having secured a seat and the salary that goes with it, the next step is persuading your elected colleagues at City Hall to name you to Metro's board.

There's no requirement, by the way, that you have a vision for the region or have even given much thought to anything beyond your neighbourhood boundaries.

To get the fabulous opportunity to be a director of Metro, the only qualification you need is being skilled enough as a politician to get on the board.

Even managing an alternate's spot is worth the politicking.

The top-paid alternate in 2009 was W. Scott Hamilton, who earned \$13,340 in salary and racked up \$14,631 in expenses. Not bad considering his Delta councillor's salary is only \$28,674.

Vancouver's Tim Stevenson (whose full-time council salary is \$57,506) was the top-paid director, with \$23,848 in salary and \$10,103 in expenses.

But best of all? Being selected as chair or vice-chair by the directors in a secret vote.

The chair earns \$63,220. Even though it's only part-time work, that is still only slightly less than the region's median family income. It's based on 75 per cent of the median gross salary of all the regional mayors.

On top of that, Metro's chair and vice-chair get paid extra just for showing up at meetings.

For current chair Lois Jackson, it worked out to \$64,371 in 2009. A nice top-up to her \$100,523 salary as Delta's fulltime mayor.

Vice-chair Richard Walton's Metro salary was \$31,412 in addition to the \$92,096 mayor's salary in North Vancouver District -a job he got by acclamation.

The directors have been clever enough to avoid double trouble. They've tied their wages to their other elected positions. Every rise in any council's salaries boosts the Metro wages.

However, there was a small flurry of debate recently among directors when some asked whether it's reasonable to accept \$322 a meeting and double that for meetings lasting more than four hours.

Since several meetings are often held on the same day, some directors had been collecting \$966 for one day's work.

Coun. Gayle Martin of Lanley City was one of the vocal opponents of last month's decision to cap daily meeting pay at \$644. Under the old system she'd done well, earning \$33,619 as a Metro director in 2009 -a third more than she earned as an elected councillor.

What's astonishing is that the 2009 Metro payroll included 121 individual directors, alternates and committee members.

More astounding is that at a time when most other employees received little or no wage increase, Metro's remuneration to directors and elected officials was hiked to \$854,611. That was a 27.8-per-cent increase over 2008 and a 32-per-cent increase over 2007.

Metro directors' expenses also more than doubled between 2008 and 2009 -the result of a decision that to keep the water flowing, garbage and sewage collected and to divine Metro's built form in 2040, these part-timers need to travel internationally.

Most Metro residents probably have no idea that the Metro directors are so well paid. So it's no surprise that nobody is asking the question: Are they worth it?

But even if running the region merits paying part-time directors nearly \$1 million a year, doesn't it seem plausible that fewer directors devoting fulltime attention to the task might be more valuable?

Aside from developing a specific expertise, their loyalty would not be divided between regional interests and parochial concerns.

Of course, a full-time board would mean changing the way directors are chosen. The only sensible solution is direct election.

But as part-time gigs go in Metro, for now this is the best one going. So don't expect any board members to be proposing -or supporting -any of this any time soon.

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