

WV to revamp community engagement

Citizen input to committee said to be weak; openness questioned

BY SAM SMITH, NORTH SHORE NEWS APRIL 26, 2013

IN an effort to breathe life back into the District of West Vancouver's community engagement committee, former and current members of the CEC have asked council to revisit how the citizen/council group works.

The CEC and its offshoot working groups are designed for keen citizens to take part in discussions and debates with the goal of influencing or creating new policies for elected officials to review.

However, working group observers and current and former members attending an April 15 council committee meeting said the current policy regarding the CEC is restrictive, confusing and at times overwhelming.

Council regulars Patricia Bolton and Alex Tunner said the citizen side of the CEC is weak and new policy changes need to be made to make citizens feel less lost during meetings and more included in the dialogue.

They recommended that council do three things: reaffirm and adopt the 2008 CEC terms; review all CEC policy documents; and recruit three members of the public to join a "reconstituted" CEC.

But what the level of citizen involvement in CEC meetings should be is an area of some disagreement.

Making sub-committee meetings and research times accessible to the public leaves citizen groups feeling as though they are being watched by the Russian KGB, according to Tunner.

His comment drew the ire of Upper Lands working group observer Paul Hundal.

"The process is flawed as far as the openness; it's all words as far as the openness. . . . In practise, as a public observer trying to participate in this process, I see the opposite," Hundal said.

"I'm very concerned about the fact that the sub-committees are in-camera, and I completely disagree with Alex Tunner's defence of that, saying members of the KGB shouldn't be watching over people," he added.

As of now, the working groups have an open public process. But subcommittees shouldn't be as restricted when doing research or trying to accomplish a certain task, Tunner said.

"Flexibility is an important requirement of the working group," he said.

Citizens should be able to form a sub-committee where they can privately discuss topics and bring their ideas back to the working group, which is open to the public in the end,

said Tunner.

But Coun. Bill Soprovich didn't like the sound of private meetings.

"Openness, under the guidelines set out by the CEC, was that there was no need to enter in-camera, for any reason whatsoever. There's no need, no mechanism in the working group to do that," he said. "Under that understanding, all sessions to any group are considered to be open."

Tunner said "there's no question we're open," but to interrupt the process is "basically sabotaging the atmosphere where the working group is intending to operate.

"It borders on insanity to suggest that everywhere should be accompanied by a member of the KGB, to make sure our citizens actually adhere to some party line," he said. "The point is they come back with whatever findings they've got to the working group."

But while doing research or trying to accomplish a specific task, they should be able to operate freely as long as it's within the spirit of the guidelines, as they bring their findings to the publicly open working groups in the end anyway, Tunner said.

Longtime council watchers Carolanne Reynolds and George Pajari disagreed with Tunner, echoing Hundal's sentiment.

Coun. Craig Cameron, a former member of the CEC prior to being a councillor, said that from personal experience, he thinks policy needs to be changed to accommodate the volunteers who are trying to help.

He said orientation for new members is key. When he joined, he said he didn't know what he was doing and no one was there to bring him up to speed.

During his time, he said council and the chair of the group would take over conversation, excluding the citizen members, frustrating him to a point where he and fellow members wrote a letter expressing their displeasure during a three-hour meeting, as they had the time since "no one would listen."

Five members of the public took the opportunity to voice their support for change in the CEC policy, echoing Cameron's statements.

Council agreed it would research CEC policy and come back with an action plan.

newsroom@nsnews.com

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