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JAMES: Council exchange goes beyond 'A' word

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

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"The North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce would like to express its support of Councillor Heywood's motion that both North Vancouver municipalities join forces and ask the provincial government for guidance and funding to undertake a restructuring and feasibility study..."

So began the courteous letter chamber president Louise Ranger addressed to City of North Vancouver council at its regular meeting on Feb. 24.

Copied to the board of directors, the letter made a case for the chamber's endorsement of Coun. Guy Heywood's motion and sought a "fact-based analysis" of potential opportunities for "better integrated planning on shared issues such as transportation planning, economic development, funding of non-profit programs and recreational facilities and services."

The letter recognized that although a study might not recommend outright amalgamation, "the North Vancouver community would be in a better position to make that decision based on current and relevant information."

By implication, Heywood and Ranger acknowledged that citizens have a right to discuss how they are governed.

Little did they know their efforts to resolve what has been a 50-year debate would raise issues way beyond amalgamation of the two North Vancouver municipalities.

Prior to every council meeting, most mayors remind speakers they "may not speak disrespectfully" of any council or staff member or other presenters.

Ranger's words and content were positive and respectful.

Neither she nor the broader community deserved the tone of the email she received from Mayor Darrell Mussatto the following morning.

Over the years, whenever the "A" word surfaced within hearing distance, oblivious to the fact that his is only one of seven voices on council, Mussatto has vehemently rejected any suggestion that it even been countenanced, let alone adopted.

So unfortunately, in his deep-seated aversion to the idea, Mussatto also lost sight of the fact that all members of council have a right to participate in the action to be taken on a delegation or letter addressed to them.

But none of that background excuses the thinly veiled threat of retaliation against the chamber's position.

Having taken Ranger's presentation as a personal affront to his own opposition to amalgamation and saying he had "led the charge on Council to ensure that the Chamber receives a tax deferral.. .," Mussatto's later comment that he would "certainly have to reassess this relationship if . . . you can say that we actually have one" was disturbing.

Equally presumptuous was his other claim that: "if I had not shown the leadership the (Low Level Road) expansion project would not have happened.

Just ask Robin Silvester at Port Metro Vancouver."

When Heywood's motion was finally discussed on March 31, it succeeded by a vote of 4: 3, with Mussatto and Couns.

Keating and Buchanan opposed.

But the story cannot end there.

Today, as a result of this and subsequent events, we are at the point where several issues need to be settled once and for all.

The first point is fundamental to the process: no one mayor, no council has the authority to deny citizens their democratic right to raise and discuss matters they believe are important to their community.

Indeed, the preamble read before every regular council meeting states: "The Public Input Period provides an opportunity for the public to speak directly to Council. .. and to any topic the speaker feels is of relevance to City Council."

Next, although not covered in the Community Charter, any member of council who denies citizens an opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of amalgamation is de facto in a conflict of interest because they stand to lose their income should consolidation occur.

The legislation also lacks a comprehensive definition of the word "censure" but the spirit of the charter suggests Mussatto was also in conflict when he voted on Coun. Heywood's subsequent motion that "council dissociate itself" from the mayor's Feb. 25 letter to Ranger.

I would be remiss if I ended this column without the following addendum: For many years, I benefitted from the chamber's extended health plan and, in the early 1990s, sat on one of the body's small committees.

More recently, I have been unhappy with the chamber's approach to several community changing issues.

Notably, I strongly disagreed when the chamber announced it supported the HST; when it said it supported certain North Vancouver developments and when it declared its support for the port's Low Level Road expansion.

The basis for that disagreement was that the chamber failed to survey the will of its membership prior to taking those positions.

Political kiss-and-make up photo-ops are not enough.

We were all diminished by the side-swipe the chamber received after it had followed due process by merely agreeing with a "restructuring" analysis and discussion before the final step is taken.

What is needed now from the mayor is a public and sincere apology to everyone concerned.

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