

north shore news

City of North Vancouver flirts with cutting public input

Council backs off on outright ban, instead looks to enforce conduct

[Brent Richter](#) / North Shore News

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File photo North Shore News

The City of North Vancouver won't muzzle members of the public from speaking up at council, but let it be known, anyone who is disrespectful to staff could be banned.

Council voted 6-1 Monday night to toss out its old council meeting rulebook and start fresh. Most of the changes are in the realm of clarifications and housekeeping but a plan to eliminate the public input period drew the most heated response.

For the last 10 years, council has allowed residents to sign up and speak carte blanche for two minutes at the start of each council meeting. Most often, it is used to comment on issues on the agenda, but as a city staff report noted: "Quite often the public input received is off-topic, accusatory, repetitive, untrue, promotes goods and services and, at times, includes electioneering."

Ending the public input period would bring the city in line with some other Lower Mainland municipalities and still meet the statutory requirements set out in provincial law, staff stated, and residents could still apply to appear before council as a delegation, which allows 10 minutes to address council.

But that wasn't enough to justify banning the practice outright in the minds of 16 residents, representing an array of political backgrounds, who lined up for their two-minute turn at the mic.

Critiques of the plan ranged from the high-minded notions of standing up for democracy and respecting the soldiers who died for the right to freedom of speech to the more practical matters, like the fact residents only get access to council agendas on Friday afternoons, leaving no other opportunity to speak to a matter publicly before council votes or that it takes months to get a delegation.

Council was persuaded.

A motion from Coun. Craig Keating amended the wording of the bylaw to keep the public input period but also allow

members of the public to be prohibited from speaking "...if it is determined they have targeted city staff, in any venue, by behaviour that can be seen to constitute bullying and harassment" under the city's harassment policy.

"I can think of one person in particular who regularly makes appearances at the public table after having posted on social media what can only be described as vicious, bullying, intimidating attacks on city staff," Keating said before pulling out editorial cartoons and posts from social media suggesting staff had been inept, dishonest or corrupt.

"Public input, absolutely yes, but for those people who we can show through social media accounts or other things, have used language that is intimidating, defamatory, libellous, constitutes attacks on staff and falls within the bullying policy we have in the city, I think those people should be deprived of the right to speak and participate in the public input process."

The change won enough votes for the bylaw to pass but questions remain over what legal authority the city has to make those judgment calls and how heavily it will be enforced.

"While I recognize that, of late, public input has resulted in less than desirable conduct on the part of some members of the public who expressed their views in language that is perhaps too strong or showing a lack of respect, I think it would be a very serious wrong to change our process for that reason when we have alternative ways of addressing those questions of conduct and tone and respect," said Coun. Pam Bookham.

Former mayoral candidate Kerry Morris said after the meeting it is obvious he is the "person in particular."

Morris said he has used social media to spread the cartoons, which are made by a local amateur cartoonist, maybe half a dozen times — and that there's nothing wrong with that.

"I'm one of millions of people that do that. Is that an illegal act to retweet a cartoon somebody has made in satire? I believe that was the central issue that caused a half a dozen people to be shot to death in France this past year. I don't think I have done anything that is either illegal or would constitute a breach of workplace regulation," he said.

"I think what this is, is an attempt to stifle debate on any matter that the mayor or the slate oppose."

Morris said he'll deal with being told he's been banned from public input periods, if and when it happens and in the meantime, he is owed an apology by Keating.

The District of North Vancouver allows council attendees three minutes to speak at the start of each meeting. The District of West Vancouver allows residents to speak to any item on the agenda as it comes up for up to three minutes.