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West Vancouver tops spending list

Stefania Seccia / North Shore News
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West Vancouver spends more money per person - and collects more tax dollars per resident - than any other Lower Mainland municipality, according to a recent report from the Fraser Institute.

The right-leaning public policy think tank compared government finances of 17 municipalities in Metro Vancouver - including examining government spending, revenue and debt from 2002 to 2012.

West Vancouver was not only the highest spender in 2012 - at \$2,118 per person - but also the leader in extracting the most cash per resident at \$2,548 per person.

The regional average for municipal spending was \$1,384 per person and for collecting was \$1,916 per resident.

But District of West Vancouver Mayor Michael Smith said the bottom line is West Vancouver is a desirable place to live.

"For me, the name of the game is value for money and I think our citizens think they get really good value for the property taxes they pay," he said. "The average household receives way more services than they would in other municipalities."

In the 2014 budget approved last March, council broke its three-year pattern of not raising the residential property tax rate by increasing it by 2.92 per cent. As the average property is valued at more than \$1.8 million, it means the average household pays about \$93 more in residential property taxes.

Council also deferred or cut about \$2 million worth of projects across various departments and reported no surplus.

The study also noted that West Vancouver was at the bottom of the list when it came to how much of its property tax revenue is drawn from businesses, which is 7.9 per cent. The regional average is 40.7 per cent.

"That's because we don't think businesses should pay a disproportionate percentage of the costs of services in the municipality," Smith said. "We want to encourage business, so we make sure we look at the business tax rate and make sure it's entirely fair."

Smith said part of the reason for the high West Van numbers is it's more costly to maintain the recreation facilities, parks and infrastructure in West Vancouver than in some other areas because the municipality is on the side of a mountain. West Van's amenities are also used by many people from other areas, he said.

"The thing about our parks and beaches is they're not just used by West Vancouver residents, a significant percentage are from North Vancouver who come over here to use our beaches, parks and our seawalls," he said. "Imagine what it costs to put a sewer and water line through West Vancouver (compared) to Surrey where you're going through a flat field. Here we're going through a mountain."

"But our quality of life is the best."

Smith also noted that police and fire are among the biggest expenses.

"We have four fire halls in the municipality because of our geography," he noted. "Whereas the City of North Vancouver, which has a higher population, they have one fire hall."

According to the study, New Westminister spent the second-highest per person (\$1,837) followed by Vancouver (\$1,689). Surrey was in last place at \$951.

In collecting the most revenue per person, West Vancouver was again followed by New Westminister (\$2,424) and Vancouver (\$2,167).

Surrey collected the least amount per person at \$1,451.

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