

north shore news

District council's dirty little secret

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With the autumnal equinox behind us, fall is here. Just as surely, the approaching municipal election season has already kicked into gear.

Municipal voting day is Saturday, Nov. 15. Things will look a little different the day after that. Several councillors in the city and the district are hanging up their spurs - including Alan Nixon in the district and Guy Heywood in the city. There's been scuttlebutt at recent community association meetings that two other sitting district councillors may also wrap it up. That'll suit residents fed up with this gaggle of land developer-poodles.

Next time you're stuck in traffic-that's any weekday morning or evening nowadays - remember the current mix of mayor and councillors who helped thicken the recipe but who'll plead for your vote again. The city's leadership has rolled over on cue for land developers as well, so no help there.

That's widely known. What's been hid and what's been hid, as Bob Dylan says, is the dark matter in all this. In 2012, B.C.'s Ombudsperson Kim Carter spoke on the issue of open municipal meetings - the cornerstone of local government and the element that assures decision-making is accessible to the public. However, in the district the facts speak differently. In response to a freedom of information request in late spring inquiring about the practice of "closed special meetings", the reply from municipal hall was disturbing.

Traditionally, closed meetings - the Latin is "in camera" - are for sensitive discussion of law, labour and land issues. Because senior hiring, personnel evaluations, legal issues, or touchy property matters can be involved, legal advisors are often present.

During my own term on council the need for such sessions was vigorously debated, normally with the late-Ernie Crist arguing heatedly for the public's right to know. If we held a closed meeting, it was for a damned important reason.

What's suddenly so different? Attending regular council meetings as a resident, you have an opportunity to stand up and speak on almost anything germane to local government business and policy. There are also public hearings and meetings of the committee as a whole, which are more focused on specific topics. If you care, you get to know what's going on.

The district letter informed the springtime letter-writer of the growing amount of council's time spent in closed meetings. What turned up was jarring: in 2012, 19 regular council meetings totalled 47 hours of open meeting time. But a further 57 closed meetings totalled 49 hours of business being conducted with restricted access. In an age of "open government" and "transparency" more of our civic business is really getting done behind closed doors than in public view.

In 2013 it got worse. A total of 22 regular council meetings equalled 49 hours of open business; 47 closed meetings resulted in 81 hours of closed door sessions. Why this increased reliance on secret meetings?

In the late 1990s we took on senior governments in Supreme Court legal cases defending Seymour's forests from the axe and from the 10,000 new residents that politicians across the inlet insisted would be good for us. What's happened even remotely similar with this mayor and council that secrets are concealed so often? High-rise redevelopment deals in Lynn Valley and Lower Capilano? The colossal giveaway of building height for high-rises at the end of the Ironworkers bridge that not even the developers imagined was possible?

It's not normal doing municipal business this way. John Ralston Saul, one of Canada's foremost public thinkers, has called this management style part of the "corporate coup d'état" that's eating away at the foundations of our democracy. Yes, there are polite, quiet announcements of decisions made in special closed meetings, but

what's the story behind those decisions and who benefits? Council-watchers in the Federation of North Vancouver Community Associations (FONVCA) had this on their latest agenda. They're alarmed.

In the city, Kerry Morris is challenging Mayor Darrell Mussatto and the debate is squarely about ethics too. Morris has a well-thought out program. It's on the web. Mussatto has the incumbency and long experience that's tough to beat. Four-time former city councillor Bill Bell is back in the running and so is his wife - it's a family affair! Iani Makris, Lower Lonsdale business proprietor and owner of Anatoli's Souvlaki is also stepping up, as is business manager Matt Clarke. Expect a couple of new faces here.

Amalgamation? It's an election time smoke screen to cover the ugly big developments district council's bean counters slickered through and that have voters ornery. Even if it makes sense, it's like asking Switzerland to join Romania.

At candidates meetings, focus instead on the glaring lack of truly affordable housing for young people. They'll tell you, "If you think the Stanley Cup riots in town were just about hockey, you don't know what's happening out there." It's a critical generational issue that began with federal Conservative cuts. Who's willing to fight for a rebirth of CMHC-style cooperative housing? It's the workable solution when land values encourage ownership into the hands of offshore speculators instead for our local, grown kids.

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