

## Reflections on the referendum

By Doug Holmes

The people have spoken and the results of the Nov. 4 referendum (No: 58%, Yes: 42%) make it clear that now is not the right time for the proposed recreation centre project. In the coming months, Council will discuss next steps and consider how to keep the community involved as we work together to determine Summerland's future recreation needs.

While referendums enhance democracy by giving people direct involvement in the decision-making process, they are also inherently divisive. A 'yes' or 'no' choice leaves little room for nuance – you're forced to choose a side. And whenever people are pitted against each other, tension and conflict follow.

Inevitably, the process and people involved in the process become subjects of debate along with the question on the ballot. It doesn't seem to matter that it's the Province that makes the rules, for everything from voter eligibility to the wording of the referendum question.

Some people were upset by the lack of options on the ballot even though legislation requires a single 'yes' or 'no' question. The Province would not have allowed additional choices like renovation of the existing pool or approval on condition of grant funding.

Without being able to provide multiple choices, Council tried to work through the various options and scenarios in advance of the referendum. Over a period of five years, we undertook studies, planning, and community engagement that included public surveys and open houses. Several options were presented, and the proposal that went to ballot was the one that had the most support from public consultation.

In last year's general election, there was a clear consensus among the candidates on the need to bring the preferred option to a referendum. The economic situation may have changed over the course of the year but not proceeding with a referendum would have been an act of bad faith.

In this era of high interest rates and inflation, it is difficult to envision any municipal recreation centre being built without the support of senior levels of government. People are right to question why the federal and provincial governments could contribute two-thirds of the cost for recreation centres in cities like Penticton but can no longer provide funding to smaller communities like Summerland. It feels like we have been penalized for doing a good job at maintaining and extending the life of our aging aquatic centre.

Our \$25m grant application to construct a net-zero emissions recreation centre remains adrift in federal Limbo Land. We don't know what will become of the application but it will have to be taken into account when Council considers next steps.

In the meantime, it's important that Council and the community as a whole puts their differences aside, accept the referendum results, and move on. The important thing isn't how any one person voted, but how we engaged in a democratic process as a community.

With rights come responsibilities, and it was heartening to see so many residents attend the open houses, information sessions and tours to learn more, weigh the pro's and con's, and ultimately cast their vote. We all need to remain engaged and try to build consensus on a way forward.

*Doug Holmes is the mayor of Summerland*