

Making Council meetings more productive

By Mayor Holmes

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Council meetings are the most visible part of local government. They're essential for transparency and accountability as it's where the public can hear from every Council member and see how decisions are made.

As mayor, it's my responsibility to ensure Council meetings run smoothly and follow due process. But when processes are structured in a way that do not allow for efficiency, and meetings run too long and are held too often as a result, the quality of debate and decision-making can suffer.

Past Summerland councils have typically pre-scheduled 21 days a year when multiple meetings are held on the same day. Special meetings outside the scheduled dates are also called to deal with matters like the budget. In 2021, Council met a total of 99 times – sometimes several times a week, sometimes every other week, sometimes every three weeks, or maybe just once in a month.

Their irregularity and frequency means municipal staff are always either preparing for a Council meeting (and having meetings about the meeting) or following up on matters raised at a meeting. Meeting overload affects both Council and employee productivity, because, as most businesses understand, the real work gets done outside of meetings.

For 2023, Council has reduced the number of scheduled meeting days from 21 to 18. Beginning in March, we will meet regularly every three weeks.

There will still be special meetings but spreading out the scheduled dates on a consistent rotation will allow staff to be more productive. And Council members will have more flexibility to attend to constituent concerns, speak with community groups, and work with provincial and regional officials on key issues.

The new schedule will further help to improve the processing of development applications. Since two weeks' notice is required for public hearings, it's unusual for a rezoning application to receive first reading at one meeting and then for the public to provide input at the next. With meetings held every three weeks, that can now happen as a matter of course.

Council has also agreed to delegate to staff the approval of minor development variances, in accordance with changes to provincial legislation. This will reduce processing times by two or three weeks, and it will free space on the Council agenda.

Council agendas are usually jammed with discussion items, some more significant than others, some requiring a decision, some purely for information. To stay focused on the issues, we have introduced a "consent agenda", which have become common among corporate and non-profit boards as well as municipal councils.

With a consent agenda, routine items like correspondence and meeting minutes are bundled together and voted on as a single motion without discussion. Items that previously might have taken an hour to review are now dealt with in minutes.

The Mayor and Deputy Mayor, in consultation with the Chief Administrative Officer and Corporate Officer, decide what to place on the consent agenda in advance of each Council meeting. However, at the meeting, any Councillor may move any consent item to the regular agenda for discussion.

It's important that the municipality is well served by its governance processes. By restructuring our meeting procedures, Council can be more productive while ensuring fulsome debate and deliberation on the issues that matter most to Summerland.