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Mayoral Remarks – January 29, 2024 Mayor and Council Coffee

Good morning,

I appreciate everyone taking the time to join us for today's event. Mayor Tait sends her regrets as she tends to an urgent family matter. On behalf of Mayor Tait, I am pleased to share the following remarks.

It's a pleasure for Council to have the opportunity to connect with the community and share important updates.

As I begin, I wish to recognize the traditional territory on which Sooke is located and gratefully acknowledge the T'Sou-ke Nation who have stewarded these lands since time immemorial.

There is a lot going on in Sooke.

From staff recruitment to capital works to numerous provincially legislated changes to budget preparations to challenges with traffic and so much more.

I'll try to be brief as I share more about current activities, before we provide an opportunity for questions, and then disburse through the room to engage in more conversations.

1. Chief Administrative Officer Search and other recruitment:

Firstly, I want to update you on the ongoing executive search for a new Chief Administrative Officer. While this process continues, we are fortunate to have Raechel Gray, our Director of Financial Services, stepping in to fill this important role.

We currently anticipate having this position filled in the spring.

On the staffing front, we have also recently hired a new Building Inspector who will begin on February 12th, an HR Manager who will begin on February 20th, and we are currently recruiting for an Engineering Technologist, Fire Prevention/Life Safety Educator, a Director of Planning and Development, and will very shortly be recruiting for an auxiliary Bylaw Officer.

Our staffing contingent when at full capacity includes 56 full time employees.

This staffing compliment provides a wide variety of services including 24/7 fire services, wastewater plant operations which also require 24/7 monitoring, parks care, bylaw enforcement, roads and underground services, planning and development including Community Economic Development,

along with administrative resources including finance, information technology, corporate services and communications.

In lieu of a full staffing compliment, we have numerous staff juggling multiple roles to support the team. Our dedicated staff continue to show their commitment to the community time and time again, and I'd like to acknowledge their efforts.

2. Building Service Division

An area that recently resulted in some unexpected resourcing challenges was building services.

Building services plays an integral role in managing the BC Building Code, which is a provincial regulation governing new construction, building alterations, repairs and demolitions.

The Code establishes minimum requirements for safety, health, accessibility, fire and structural protection, as well as energy and water efficiency in buildings.

Adherence to these standards is crucial for the safety and well-being of our community.

I would like to recognize the delays that our building and development community has previously experienced and also the celebrate the progress made in this area. As of two weeks ago, we are caught up on all outstanding building permit applications awaiting inspection!

That is not to say we do not have more work to do in this area.

Incomplete applications are a significant cause of delays, which means the process is not user-friendly.

Technology is rapidly evolving, and staff are enhancing systems behind the scenes that will offer vast improvements in this area. While this will take time to realize, this work is underway. Staff anticipate rolling out some of these enhancements in the coming months.

3. Major Capital Works:

In terms of major capital works, significant strides are being made on the Church/Throup Roundabout. Telus is completing site works, which means those travelling in the area will see less of an impact on roadworks for several weeks before the roundabout construction takes place. Upcoming works also include the second lift of asphalt and the surrounding multi-use trails.

The project team aims for substantial completion this spring.

This project is being funded by a combination of grants, the Building Communities Fund, Development Cost Charges and reserve funds – the latter which accumulate through taxes.

Charters Road is undergoing restructuring with the addition of sidewalks and bike lanes, set for substantial completion by year-end.

This project is being funded predominantly through the Building Communities Fund.

We also have a \$500,000 grant application into the province for this project. We seek additional financial assistance, whenever possible, to lessen the burden on our residential tax base.

These efforts have results in millions of dollars in third party funding over the last few years.

Best efforts are being undertaken to not have road closures overlap; however, in navigating environmental considerations such as fish windows and weather, this may be inevitable.

Ravens Ridge Park is set to see an expansion later this year. We are looking to tender this project in the spring. The works will result in the addition of bleachers, additional recreation amenities including basketball and landscaping. This project is being funded by grants and the Building Communities Fund.

Little River Crossing is reaching final design. While we received \$1.3 million in federal funding for this project, we are seeking another \$500,000 from the province as we aim for a summer 2025 opening.

4. Commute Challenges and Solutions:

Regarding transportation, I understand the frustrations, particularly during the evening commute. Balancing infrastructure upgrades with minimizing disruptions is a top priority, but it comes with many challenges.

We are exploring various short, medium, and long-term solutions to address this problem that so many in our community are experiencing, such as:

- Moving forward with the implementation of the Transportation Master Plan as quickly as resources allow which will help with traffic flow off of Highway 14
- discussions with MOTI, who are responsible for Highway 14;
- carpooling considerations;
- pedestrian enhancements to support local alternative travel, in particular with schools which are a key bottleneck on Highway 14;
- discussions with School District 62 on the school locations and access points;
- BC Transit capacity expansions; and
- greater local employment opportunities to name a few.

Unfortunately specific to transit, in recent weeks, a shortage of staff end has resulted in several trip cancellations – including during peak times.

Prior to this, BC Transit had added capacity during peak times - introducing a 40% expansion in spring 2023.

Alongside this expansion, before the cancellations we are seeing right now, ridership had increased by 26%.

This staffing shortage is exasperating a challenging situation further and I recognize our population growth is also affecting the situation.

Please know that we are not complacent on the traffic and its negative impact on the quality of life for our residents being any form of a new normal.

While some solutions cannot be realized tomorrow, Council is exploring all options and has requested MOTI representatives attend an upcoming meeting as a delegation to connect on this subject at a public meeting.

5. Housing Challenges and Legislative Changes:

The honest reality is that our growth is unlikely to slow any time in the near future.

Surprising to many of us, Sooke has been identified as a "specified municipality" in the provincial *Housing Supply Act*. This means that by order, the Minister of Housing will establish housing targets for Sooke.

Before making a housing target order, the minister must consult with the municipality. I'll note that while Sooke has been "specified", we have not yet been consulted.

There are several more legislative changes on the horizon that impact municipalities around the province, including Sooke.

A Housing Needs Report must be done every 5 years using methodology provided by the province. We expect to receive this in the coming weeks.

The Official Community Plan requires additional revisions, and it must capture housing projections for 20 years and be updated every 5 years. This must be done by December 2025.

Sooke is well-positioned for the next steps with the OCP given recent engagement. Once we have more information from the province, we will look to resume work on this important plan that guides land use and development for our community.

The province is also regulating 4-units being permitted on single-family and duplex lots where infrastructure is available. Our Zoning Bylaw needs to be updated by June 2024 to reflect this change.

There are opportunities for exemptions within this bylaw. Staff are currently researching where this might apply and are likely to bring information to Council in the coming weeks.

This is all new – and many in local government have referred to these combined changes as the single biggest Planning and potentially administrative shift in municipalities' history.

It's a lot to take in.

What each element means for Sooke, we don't entirely know yet. In many cases we are still waiting for more information from the province.

With all of this change, we know that new tools are coming to support local governments to help ensure infrastructure is available to meet the needs of housing – and residents.

This will require stakeholder consultation to update Development Cost Charges and Amenity Cost Charges. Keep in mind, provincial approval is required before the District can start receiving revenue from such charges.

The province shares that their intent in making these changes. They are looking to:

- Work with municipalities to make sure more homes are built in communities, faster.
- Make it easier and more affordable for people to rent out secondary/basement suites.
- Speed up permitting and approvals to get homes built faster.

As we understand what each of these changes mean for Sooke, our team is committed to keeping you informed.

6. Homelessness and Park Safety:

Speaking of challenges with housing and our unhoused population, on Saturday, January 20th there was a fire in Ed Macgregor Park where some members of our community are sheltering overnight.

Upon arrival, crews discovered an unoccupied tent engulfed in flames, which was quickly brought under control. The affected area was promptly sectioned off for further cleanup efforts.

On Monday, January 22, the District initiated a comprehensive park cleanup, addressing not only the aftermath of the fire but also the surrounding area.

District staff collaborated with the owner of belongings stored near the park's amphitheatre, coordinating the securing of personal items while facilitating the disposal of remaining materials.

The District is committed to ensuring the safety of all park users, including visitors, staff, and individuals experiencing homelessness.

The public is reminded that, following a Supreme Court ruling, where there is limited accessible shelter space in the community, overnight sheltering in parks is permitted from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 a.m. However, it is crucial to emphasize that this provision is not intended to serve as a long-term storage solution for personal belongings.

The District has reestablished an action plan to provide increased maintenance to help ensure Ed Macgregor Park is a safe and welcoming space for everyone to enjoy. Those visiting the park can expect an increased presence of bylaw services and outreach workers.

Staff will continue to evaluate the park use and related maintenance while also understanding more about shelter capacity and available shelter space.

We are tracking these costs and will seek to recover associated expenses, if at all possible.

Over the weekend, MLA Ravi Parmar highlighted his commitment for helping us realize an integrated health centre in Sooke. The identified site for this facility is on Wadams Way by the Library.

7. Wounded Warriors Run:

Speaking of our first responders, the District is proud to support the Wounded Warriors Run.

Wounded Warriors honours and supports Canada's ill and injured Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans, First Responders and their families.

Public can expect delays on Highway 14 on Sunday, February 4, 2024 as the Wounded Warriors Run (One Day Event) travels from Sooke to Sidney. Runners will leave from the Sooke Legion at approximately 10 a.m. and are expected to reach the end of the "original" four-lanes by the Co-op Gas Station in Langford around noon.

We kindly ask those travelling in the area to please give runners space and follow the guidance of the support vehicles.

8. Budget Process:

Also, in February, will be budget meetings.

Your input lays the foundation for Sooke's budget development.

From mid-June to mid-August each year, Sooke conducts an annual budget survey which includes evening and weekend pop-ups to receive your input.

More than 1,000 residents participated in this process last year and we are truly grateful for your input.

We know that our role as elected officials is to represent the best interests of the community. Having your active participation in these opportunities is integral to help us serve in this capacity.

I understand it will be a tough budget year. With 5 of the last 10 years seeing a zero or near zero tax increase, and inflation continually increasing, we are hitting a pinch point.

While efforts are made to diversify our tax base, which is comprised (approximately) of 85% residential, 14% commercial and 1% industrial, we know that this means that residents who are already feeling the effects of tough economy are likely to be impacted by a property tax increase.

Such action is never a decision made lightly.

From listening to our residents, we know that first responder services are a priority.

Roads are a priority.

Parks and the environment are a priority.

As inflation hits each resident and your places of work, it's hitting our organization too.

I know that on one of the storyboards, staff are inviting a question – what can you buy for \$15? Share your comments there.

As our budget discussions begin at upcoming public meetings and we have the tough conversations examining service levels, know that, again, your input has laid the foundation for our budget.

Also, a part of our budget process is our call for community grant applications. The application deadline is March 15th. Staff have applications available for those interested in picking one up – or please find the applications on our website.

Closing:

As I wrap up and turn to your questions, I want to – again - thank you for joining us today.

Your input and engagement are invaluable.

As we move forward, it's evident that our community is facing various challenges, but it's equally clear that we are tackling them head-on with dedication and resilience.

With that, Council is happy to take a few questions, before we break apart to allow more one-on-one and small group discussions.