

Citizen's budget 'received'

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An ad hoc citizens' budget committee formed in late February has presented a list of proposals and recommendations to Central Saanich council.

The committee was formed by a group of citizens after Frank Witthoeft and Mike Fagan wrote to council requesting they form an independent Citizens Budget Advisory Group to assist the council with recommendations on budgetary issues, and responded to questions from members of council. At the time council recommended Witthoeft involve himself with the upcoming budget and financial planning process, as they did not feel there was enough time to decide on the parameters on which a citizens' budget advisory committee could be formed.

They referred the request to a future Administration and Finance Committee for further discussion.

The ad hoc committee was formed without council support and is facilitated by councillor Zeb King.

Among the 15 lengthy recommendations made by the 30-member committee were suggestions to: "Increase revenues by fairly taxing almost "free riders" such as secondary suite residents and First Nations -; Delete the Senanus study as local residents have a study in hand that they will upgrade at no cost to the municipality; A majority of the budget increase is due to increases in staff salary and benefits - consider zero increases for the next three years and subsequently putting a cap on salary increases at 60 per cent of the cost of living index -; - our policing cost per capita is only exceeded by Victoria's. In contrast, the "Case Burden" is the lowest of any of the local municipalities - It is recommended that hiring be frozen until caseloads warrant it; It is further recommended that councillors inform themselves of alternative policing possibilities and refuse increases to the police budget until such time as the caseload warrants it; It is recommended that the Supplementary budget and associated process be deleted and only a Core budget be tables every year. Council spends most of its time reviewing the supplementary budget even though it constitutes only about one- third of the tax increase - It is recommended that staff maintain a running "tab" of the estimated costs of Council generated expenses along with the accompanying impact on tax increases. An ongoing summary of the tab should be included in the agendas of regular meetings of Council and the Finance and Administration Commission."

"What we'd like to see is a motion from Council recommending the Budget Advisory group's recommendations - and to bring it in as a committee [of council] as we requested," said Frank Witthoeft, chair of the Advisory Budget Committee.

"I think we should receive this with thanks and the contents noted," suggested councillor Robert Thompson.

"I would hope that there would be follow-up motions for further discussion by committees or council," said councillor Zeb King.

"There are lots of points here that are useful, but to be honest a meeting now and another budget [committee] meeting to make subsequent changes - we've had our public input. The motion to receive is appropriate at this time and to have committee leave the discussion for another day," said councillor John Garrison.

King then made a motion for council to consider creating a budget advisory committee, there was no seconder to the motion and it died.

King then made a motion that council hold a special committee meeting to answer questions regarding the budget process posed by another resident. That motion was passed by council.

"I feel we've gone into this process with a tight timeline, but we still have an opportunity to discuss [the letters] - for next year's budget process. We have to value the effort that the public has put in," said councillor Alastair Bryson.

"We do have an open public system in terms of input," said Thompson. "We've had more than adequate public input. I'm not convinced that another meeting will assist in the process - last November there was an election held, we were elected, and part of our job is to make those decisions."

King said he was "flabbergasted" that councillors were not in favour of holding a special meeting. "There are 40 questions here - lots of great points and questions - some would be best answered by staff, some by the chair of finance some by individual members of council. If we pass this to one member of council we may not get answers to the member of the public.

"Our Strategic Plan says we need to seek ways to involve the public in the budget process - that means we should go above and beyond the public budget meeting," said King.

"Some of the questions are within provincial jurisdiction and [regarding] the method of taxation - we can't respond to the provincial process - we could take it forward to the UBCM," suggested Bryson.