

Council Question Period Procedure

Policy Change Management

Background

At the council meeting on October 16, 2017 an adjusted policy for question period that is not integrated into the Council Procedure bylaw was presented and expressed to have been created primarily to address concerns of efficiency, along with other concerns. These policy adjustments were immediately implemented at that meeting and currently remain in effect.

Since that date, there have been a variety of changes to the implementation of this policy at council meetings including the removal of staff at question period, the meeting chair reading the questions out loud at times instead of the person asking the question resulting in no direct interaction, and significant time being spent in debate towards determining whether questions meet the new policy definition.

The positive intent applied towards the creation of new policy changes is recognized, however in practice, the policy changes were introduced in a preliminary manner without an appropriate process applied to address concerns prior to its implementation which has introduced significant procedural issues. As a result, considerable negative effects have been increasing as the policy implementation is adjusted on-the-fly in a reactive manner by applying workarounds intended to address policy inadequacies rather than addressing the overall policy itself through solid change management processes and the application of effective measures at the bylaw level.

Overall, the negative effects of this policy and its varying implementation greatly outweighs the perceived benefits towards this valuable method of citizen to council engagement. Incremental changes continue to increase confusion, discourage citizen participation, introduce further inefficiencies and detrimental effects, and decrease the usefulness and effectiveness of this important engagement tool.

New Policy Issues

The following highlights some of the shortfalls of this new policy and its resulting negative effects:

1. Systemic barriers have been created which affect involvement;
 - a. Individuals with reading or writing disabilities or other conditions which negatively affect their ability to participate in a dignified way as a result of the policy are not taken into consideration. Some examples of this are individuals with dyslexia, individuals with Parkinson like conditions that experience writing difficulties, quadriplegics which cannot utilize a pen, and individuals with PTSD symptoms that are triggered during increased anxiety and discomfort due to the implementation of this format.
 - b. Visually impaired individuals face a large barrier towards being able to express their question in a written format.
 - c. Individuals who have English as a second language or poor English writing skills may not be able to express themselves sufficiently with the written word to the degree that a person whose first language is English or has sufficient English writing skills can.
2. Questions requiring context to be explained in order for the question to be properly understood and answered are significantly hampered through current procedures.
3. Frequent time inefficiencies related to the length of time spent by multiple members of council responding to single questions at times where multiple responses do not assist further towards answering the questions, is highlighted and remains unaddressed.

4. Further time inefficiencies have been introduced due to the additional time required for participants with multiple questions to repeatedly arrive and leave the podium after each question.
5. Process and time inefficiencies have been introduced by requiring independent review of questions to ensure they pertain to the meeting subject material, rather than the meeting chair determining relevance. The lack of necessity for this rule is highlighted by the fact that when there are times where Council does not agree with a decision made by the chair to permit or deny a question, Council has the ability to immediately appeal that decision. Council also has the ability to call a point of order on questions and dialogue provided by individuals that stray outside of bounds or infringe upon organizational goals of ensuring a safe, respectable workplace.

Overall, the new policy is insufficiently complete to justify its continued application, and worse, is in effect directly excluding a percentage of the community from equal participation in the local governance process.

Remedial Action

The perceived benefits of this new policy are highly outweighed by its inherent negative effects. If council wishes to seek feedback from the community towards constructive changes it can be done much easier and better with proper processes and best practices at the forefront, and in a broad open manner which requests community input through the organization's various communication channels.

Continuing forth in a reactive experimental manner on a trial basis of undetermined length as it has been to date with on-the-fly policy implementation adjustments, and without quantifiable measures of success defined and proper process applied towards the initiative, is unnecessary and unwarranted. It is of great harm towards this important engagement tool which facilitates citizen participation at council meetings.

The following suggestions for potential directives would begin to remedy the concerns raised, and provide a path forward which can result in other concerns being sufficiently addressed and effectively applied in a manner that follows proper processes and best practices.

1. Direct staff to remove the new question period policies implemented on October 16, 2017 and proceed according to the original question period procedures that existed prior to the new policy implementation, until such time that potential updates for the Question Period section of Council Procedure Bylaw 7060 have been approved by council.
2. Direct staff to provide recommendations at a future meeting for updating the Question Period section of Council Procedure Bylaw 7060 that addresses council's and citizen's concerns and around Question Period policy and procedure.

If the question period process prior to October 16, 2017 is to be changed, applying due process and best practices beforehand is warranted and would naturally stabilize moving forward in a proactive manner.

References

Procedure Bylaw 7060 - Question Period (<https://www.nanaimo.ca/ByLaws/ViewBylaw/7060.pdf>)

"20.1 At the Conclusion of the proceedings, the Council members shall provide time to answer inquiries from the Media and any member of the public, but such inquiries shall be strictly limited to matters considered by the Council at that particular meeting. The Chair shall determine, if necessary, when sufficient discussion has taken place."