

Quality of Life Indicators and the Crowded Municipal Agenda

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Local government might play a critical role in supporting culture, but the agenda of small city administrations can be heavily weighted with issues that prohibit a sustained discussion of the arts and quality of life. This paper describes the municipal council environment and makes four recommendations in support of advocating quality of life issues.

INTRODUCTION

I am currently the Director of Planning for Nanaimo and my areas of responsibility include land use policy, development approvals, by-law enforcement and real estate. I am here [at the presentation] as a community partner to the Mapping Quality of Life and the Culture of Small Cities CURA or the MQOLACSC (pronounced “mollusc”). My involvement in the CURA began in Kamloops while I worked as that city’s Manager of Community Planning. When I moved to Nanaimo, I wanted to continue my participation in the CURA because of the value of the research being done and convinced my new employer to participate.

What I hope to do here is to give you a bit of a lens into my world, the world of local government, and how this question of Quality of Life Indicators fits on a small city agenda. The point of my discussion is that a municipal council’s agenda is very full. I have provided an example below; an exceptional agenda, which ran to over 300 pages - - a really heavy agenda and particularly diverse. But that level of complexity, of diverse issues, and conflicting agendas from senior government representatives, to neighbourhood residents, to developers, to property owners is not uncommon.

Council Considerations:

“Where do quality of life indicators fit within that mass of information coming before municipal council?

How do quality of life indicators fit into the realm of issues that a City Council typically would discuss?

How do indicators get “space at the table”?

How do you make those indicators important, so that Council will sit up and say: “Yes quality of life is important to our community?”

And what aspects of quality of life are truly relevant? Low fetal birth weights? Participation rates in Parks & Rec programs? Adult literacy rates?

Example of a five-hour City Council meeting (typically held on a Monday night):

(At six pm we held an “In Camera” meeting before the open Council discussed here)

The meeting started with four presentations:

1. The Mayor gave an award for bravery to a citizen who helped evacuate elderly people from a building fire.
2. A city staff member received a certificate in local government professional development.
3. The Chief Medical Health Officer for Vancouver Island made a presentation on harm reduction and specifically to distribution of crack pipes to prevent the spread of Hepatitis C among crack users, with the expected reaction from Council members.
4. The City’s environmental planner gave a PowerPoint presentation on the City’s greenhouse gas emissions and energy management plan, which was the result of over two years work by staff and consultants.

Next there were three delegations. Delegations are the part of the agenda where citizens make a case on any topic to Council. Each speaker is limited to 10 minutes:

1. One delegation was with regard to a rezoning application that was on that night’s agenda.
2. One was regarding an Official Community Plan amendment application which the speaker felt would destroy his neighbourhood.
3. The third delegation was a resident voicing his concerns in response to the harm reduction strategy presented by the Chief Medical Health Officer.

There were three proclamations issued that evening –

1. Mahatma Gandhi Day
2. Raise a Reader Day
3. Waste Reduction Week.

The next section of the agenda was staff reports. There were:

- Two reports on parking issues (one on increasing parking rates and one on preparing a parking strategy).
- A lengthy report on the corporate climate change strategy, which was presented earlier in the agenda.
- Five development permits. These are the permits that guide the form and character of new construction prior to the issuance of building permits.
- One liquor license.
- Three official community plan amendment applications.

- Two requests for Council authorization of leases for city owned property, one was for a yacht club, the other was an affordable housing project.
- Receipt and adoption of the Minutes of a public hearing.
- Fourteen nuisance property reports including a grow-op, building without a building permit, unsightly premises, and building deficiencies.
- A report on twin city relationships.
- Four information only reports (which I won't go into because council never looks at them so why should I?)

There were ten bylaws introduced for third reading and adoption that had completed the public hearing process. There were two bylaws that were brand new to the approval process and were being introduced for the first time.

10 pm: We start on the final segment of the meeting, five delegations for items not related to matters on the agenda:

- Two were related to selecting a site for a community soup kitchen for the homeless and street people. The proposed location was in the speakers neighbourhood and the speakers were concerned about the impact the soup kitchen would have on their neighbourhood.
- There were two delegations related to a development proposal.
- And there was one related to a goat. The last one concerned a woman who had brought a goat onto her property in order to keep the blackberries down. And that presentation actually took about twenty minutes.

The meeting occurred on Monday September 10, 2007. The minutes of the meeting can be found on the City of Nanaimo's website. Council agenda are also available on your city's website and you will see a similar list of issues – development proposals, neighbourhood issues, bylaw matters, the budget, taxation. Some communities are grappling with gang violence; most Councils have to deal with aspects of homelessness. And this litany of issues and problems gets repeated up to 20 times a year in Nanaimo, not including public hearings and/or committee meetings that Councillors must attend. In some communities Council meets weekly.

What you end up with is a very crowded agenda with a lot of noise that is constantly in front of municipal council.

In 2002 the City of Nanaimo attempted to identify a series of indicators that would guide our social planning policies. The resulting report called the Social Status Report was issued in May 2003. It looked at 50 indicators, which were largely drawn from the 2001 Census, from Vancouver Island Health Authority data, from the Ministry of Education, and so on. For each indicator we identified:

- Why the indicator was important
- What the situation was in Nanaimo
- How we compare to two other small cities in BC – Prince George and Kamloops and to the Provincial average
- The general trend over time
- The issues indicated by the data

- What resources we have as a community to respond to the issues
- And where the reader can go for further information.

There is a wealth of data in the report and I think it provides an excellent measure of where Nanaimo was at the beginning of this decade. But it was too much.

Council wasn't able to fathom what the report was saying (for those members of Council who read it). And many likely came away with the question, "What do you want me to do about it, anyway?" Many of the indicators, for example those pertaining to health or education, fall outside the purview of local government. The report certainly did assist the not-for-profit sector in our community and, anecdotally, I hear that the report continues to be used as a reference document by some agencies, including the United Way, in setting priorities.

Omnibus sets of indicators can be valuable for research purposes and, when drawn from national data sets like the Census of Canada, they do provide a basis for comparison amongst municipalities. But they might be considered inappropriate for the small city municipal agenda, due to cost and/or complexity

An organization that I think has done an admirable job in wrestling with this issue of complexity is the Fraser Basin Council. They have been able to boil a vast array of data down into just 15 indicators in their State of the Basin reports. The information is dense but they are at least trying to make it widely accessible.

As an aside, I would also like to put in a plug for www.gapminder.org for a fascinating look at worldwide indicators such as wealth and life expectancy.

But returning to the topic at hand, think back to my description of a small city Council agenda. To get Council's attention, data needs to be presented in easily digestible, bite-sized chunks. The proverbial "sound bite".

Lesson #1: Keep any indicator set as short and as simple as possible.

I think the greatest legacy of the Social Status Report is that it showed that "We are all in this together." By that I mean that local government, on its own, cannot respond to all the factors that make up quality of life. The Social Status Report led to an ongoing dialogue amongst levels of government and the not-for-profit sector that continues to this day. It clearly indicated that problems of poverty and homelessness were on the rise in Nanaimo.

The City of Nanaimo has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with BC Housing and Vancouver Island Health Authority to create up to 160 low barrier housing units for the homeless. On a day to day basis our social planner, neighbourhood planner, Bylaw officers, RCMP Bike squad, and Vancouver Island Health Authority work under the framework of SAFER Nanaimo to deal with issues of homelessness, mental health and addictions as well as civil disorder and downtown safety.

With the release of the 2006 Census, the City looked at replicating the Social Status Report but deemed that the exercise was too cumbersome. And I would argue, the issue of quality of life per se had slipped down Council's priority list.

In Nanaimo recently, the issue of homelessness has certainly been the focus of much municipal debate. This has been guided by Councillors' direct observation of people sleeping on our streets and by the periodic homelessness censuses that have been undertaken by the not-for-profit sector in the community. When we have people without basic shelter in our communities, the more esoteric concept of "quality of life" seems largely irrelevant.

Lesson #2: Indicators need to be relevant to the issues of the day.

Or phrased another way, indicators need to tell a story if your goal is to affect the political agenda.

Municipal politicians respond to local interest groups. If the information is sound and it paints a picture of a trend or issue that needs to be addressed then the indicator will help the cause.

But as I have already stated, the municipal agenda is crowded and the focus keeps shifting. Perhaps the most pressing need for indicators for municipal planners comes, not from local interest groups, but from the Provincial Government.

Bill 27, adopted last year in May, requires that local government create inventories and reduction targets for greenhouse gas emissions and that these targets be adopted as part of municipal Official Community Plans by May of 2010. This is largely new territory for local government, although the Province did release new data earlier this year which will assist us in meeting these requirements.

That said, local government is essentially in the "quality of life" business, whether it is through the provision of clean drinking water or providing adequate recreational facilities or managing resources to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The topic will never be removed from the municipal agenda.

This is where CURA and similar research can provide local government with the indicators to guide public policy making. It provides the data and credibility to inform the debate at the Council table. And often, the research, such as Gilles Viaud's small cities project, provides information that we as local government are unable to conduct ourselves. We haven't got the time or the resources. So when a program like the small cities project steps forward and says that "We're interested working with you on this." We as local government will say "Great."

Lesson #3: Indicators that come from reliable sources will get used.

Question: What is it you are trying to collect the indicators for? If you are doing it as a community development project, where you are working with a community, the comparability across communities isn't important. For those exercises, indicators that are specific to that community are totally appropriate.

But municipal politicians like comparisons, particularly for the wider topic of quality of life. They like looking at similar communities to see how they compare. Nanaimo will look at Kamloops and say “Gee, Kamloops – look at the sports facilities they’ve got. How do we measure up?”

Question: Does size matter to the municipal politician?

Answer: You bet.

Indicators serve different purposes. Data mined from national sources will tell a different story to that derived from local sources. If you know your purpose when selecting indicators, you are going to be much further ahead in their application.

Lesson #4: Tailor your indicators to their end use.

Are the indicators there to provide community learning? By that, I mean, is the community learning about itself and self-realizing, or is it there to learn about its place in the world? How do we stack up against the Kelownas, Prince Georges, the other communities of similar size?

Simple, easy to use, credible, easily understood indicators are needed. That’s why a project like the CURA and small city indicators are so important.

*Map My Culture: Community and Space in Small Cities
Comox Valley – May 15, 2009*

About the Author

Andrew Tucker is a graduate of the University of Waterloo and has a career that spans more than 30 years. In that time, he has worked as a municipal planner in Alberta, the Northwest Territories and BC. He is a member of the Canadian Institute of Planners and is currently the Director of Planning for the City of Nanaimo.