

DATE OF MEETING February 10, 2020

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SUBJECT **NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION STATUS AND ENGAGEMENT**

## **OVERVIEW**

### **Purpose of Report:**

To provide Council with an update on the status of Nanaimo's neighbourhood associations and how the City supports and engages with these groups.

## **BACKGROUND**

The City has maintained a supportive relationship with local neighbourhood associations over the past three decades. The underpinning of this relationship was first expressed in policy through the adoption of a vision statement for community building in 1992 as part of the Imagine Nanaimo process. Within this vision, it was stated the community should hold neighbourhoods as the vital building blocks of the city. The foundation of this idea was later made concrete through the adoption of Plan Nanaimo in 1994 and the subsequent development of various neighbourhood and area plans appended to the City's Official Community Plan (OCP) over the ensuing years (see Attachment A: Adopted Neighbourhood and Area Plans List and Map). For organizational purposes, the city was divided into fifteen distinct planning areas based on census tract boundaries established by Census Canada.

Intended to address the needs and desires of neighbourhoods within the city in the context of the OCP, "neighbourhood and area plans are designed to incorporate land use strategies (and other policies) that respond to the broader issues of the city in a way that contributes to creating more livable neighbourhoods". Underscoring this engagement commitment, the following policy can now be found in the OCP's Neighbourhood and Area Planning policy section:

"The City will promote the establishment of neighbourhood associations to support neighbourhood planning initiatives."

This key policy and other neighbourhood engagement-oriented policy contained in the OCP has guided the City's engagement and relationship building efforts with neighbourhood associations to the present day.

### **Nanaimo's Neighbourhood Associations and their Organizational Structure**

The City of Nanaimo currently recognizes 21 active neighbourhood associations (see Attachment B – Nanaimo's Neighbourhood Associations). Some of these associations have been in existence for more than 20 years, while others have formed more recently. The associations are spread throughout the city, with the oldest and most organized tending to be located within the city's older, more established neighbourhoods in its central and southern

areas. The boundary of each neighbourhood association area is self-defined by the association, and for this reason, do not generally align with the City's Planning Area boundaries. Over the years, the City has collected and monitored these boundaries to produce the Neighbourhood Association Map which effectively acts as a radar for where associations are currently active or have historically existed (see Attachment C – Neighbourhood Associations Map).

The organizational capacity of each group varies widely on a spectrum from those which are registered non-profits, such as the South End Community Association (SECA), Chase River Community Association, and Departure Bay Neighbourhood Association, to those groups which have a very informal organizational structure such as the Western Neighbourhood Association, Westwood Lake Neighbourhood Association, and Caring About Townsite Society. For each group's specific organizational status, see Attachment D – Neighbourhood Association Organizational Status.

In the past, the City has encouraged capacity building amongst the various associations, and in particular, greater organization of the associations themselves. A specific discussion was held with the associations in this regard in the late 2000s; however, it was argued by the associations that decisions to formally organize (such as through registration as a non-profit society) should be at the discretion of the neighbourhood association and not imposed by the City through mandatory recognition criteria. A key concern expressed by the associations was the likelihood that about two-thirds of the existing associations would no longer be recognized by the City if such criteria were put in place. The strength of this response was recognized and the City did not press this matter further.

Historically speaking, the neighbourhood associations have maintained a collaborative relationship with each other under a common theme of community building. Occasionally, there have been issues that have occurred over boundaries or representation (e.g., who speaks for the neighbourhood), but in general, conflict within or between associations is a rarity. The most problematic issues that have occurred since 2003 have been in the Nob Hill area, and more recently, in the Newcastle Neighbourhood area. In both cases, the problems within an association stemmed from disagreements amongst neighbours around different values causing divisions and the establishment of a competing second group.

### **How the City Engages with Neighbourhood Associations**

City Staff currently maintain a responsive communication and liaison role with the various neighbourhood associations. This role is shared between the four planners currently located within the Community Planning Section. The purpose of this liaison is to provide a point of contact for any issues or concerns the representatives of the associations may wish to discuss or need guidance on. An important part of the planner's role in this regard is to ensure the associations have accurate information or are directed to those that can be of service to them within the City organization. This includes periodically attending association meetings to provide information of interest to the group or to respond to any questions or concerns they may have. This role also helps to build trust and familiarity with the City as an organization.

City Staff support the resolution of issues within and between neighbourhood associations, but because of their independent status, generally avoid direct engagement, preferring to see the associations resolve these issues themselves.

Where a neighbourhood plan has been completed in an association's area of interest, Staff liaisons have worked with the association's representatives to monitor progress on the plan's implementation and to ensure the association is aware of progress made toward completing the plan's actions and objectives.

As specified through policy in the OCP, neighbourhood associations are notified of any rezoning, OCP amendment, and development permit applications affecting lands in their neighbourhood area. Development applicants are also encouraged to engage directly with associations to share information on their projects and to address any concerns the neighbourhood may have before an application proceeds to Council.

More recently, in 2018, Staff worked with the Community Engagement Task Force (initiated by community champions and supported by the City) to provide four community-focused engagement projects. In particular, Staff assisted the community team in holding an "Empowering Neighbourhoods Event" on 2018-NOV-21. The event was a good example of how to successfully engage and seek input from citizens (including many of the neighbourhood associations) interested in working to improve their neighbourhoods.

As part of the 2020 OCP update process, City Staff will be connecting with neighbourhood associations to ensure they are engaged and their top issues and priorities identified. This will include a review of the neighbourhood planning process and how effective it is for neighbourhoods, and if deemed necessary, consider innovative ways to make the process more effective.

### **What is the Nanaimo Neighbourhood Network and How is it Supported by the City**

The City encouraged and supported the creation of the Nanaimo Neighbourhood Network (NNN) in 2003 as an independent body. Due to its independent status, the NNN does not receive operational funding from the City and sets its own agenda. A previous version of the network was active in the mid to late 1990s, but was discontinued due to member burnout.

The purpose of the NNN since 2003 has been to facilitate the ongoing development of effective neighbourhood associations through shared information, consultation and decision-making between neighbourhood associations, municipal government and other organizations (see Attachment E – NNN Mandate). The NNN meets three times a year in February, June, and October for a two-hour meeting to exchange information on issues, challenges, and successes in each respective neighbourhood.

City staff currently support the NNN through the booking of the SARC Board Room for meetings, and by having one Staff member from the Community Planning Section attend to act as an information resource should the network members need it. On occasion, select City Staff attend the NNN meetings to provide information on specific initiatives of relevance to the neighbourhood associations, or at the request of the NNN. In all cases, the key focus is on the sharing of information between the associations, and between the associations and the City representative.

### **How Do Other Communities Support and Engage Neighbourhood Associations**

Many cities across Canada recognize the value of neighbourhood associations and choose to support and collaborate with these groups.

While no funding is directly provided to the NNN or its member neighbourhood associations, there has been an interest shown in the past by some of the associations for the City to create a small, dedicated “Neighbourhood Grant Program.” The hope is this program would focus on providing operational grants to increase association organizational capacity and provide a source of money for small-scale, neighbourhood-based capital improvement projects.

Such programs have been in place for years in a number of communities across Canada and the USA. Regional examples include the District of Saanich, City of Victoria, City of Vancouver, City of Surrey, and City of Seattle (Department of Neighbourhoods). Some of these programs include stricter eligibility and organizational criteria (e.g., City of Victoria), while others are fairly open ended with respect to which community-based groups they provide grant funding to (e.g., City of Seattle).

There are many approaches that municipalities use to support and engage with neighbourhood associations and other community-based groups within their boundaries. The key objective of most approaches is to promote the flow of information between the municipality and the neighbourhood associations and build a participatory framework and dialogue for citizen involvement in the creation of livable neighbourhoods.

For reference purposes, Attachment F – Comparison of Neighbourhood Support and Engagement in Other Municipalities briefly summarizes how a few select local municipalities engage with and support neighbourhood associations within their communities.

### **SUMMARY POINTS**

- The City has maintained a supportive relationship with local neighbourhood associations over the past three decades.
- The City of Nanaimo currently recognizes 21 active neighbourhood associations. Some of these associations have been in existence for more than 20 years, while others have formed more recently.
- The City encouraged and supported the creation of the NNN in 2003 as an independent body. Due to its independent status, the network does not receive operational funding from the City and sets its own agenda.
- City Staff support the resolution of issues within and between neighbourhood associations, but because of their independent status, generally avoid direct engagement, preferring to see the associations resolve these issues themselves.
- Many cities across Canada recognize the value of neighbourhood associations and choose to support and collaborate with these groups.
- As part of the 2020 OCP update process, City Staff will be connecting with neighbourhood associations to ensure they are engaged and their top issues and priorities identified. This will include a review of the neighbourhood planning process and how effective it is for neighbourhoods, and if deemed necessary, consider innovative ways to make the process more effective.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

ATTACHMENT A: Adopted Neighbourhood and Area Plans  
ATTACHMENT B: Nanaimo's Neighbourhood Associations  
ATTACHMENT C: Neighbourhood Associations Map  
ATTACHMENT D: Neighbourhood Associations Organizational Status  
ATTACHMENT E: NNN Mandate  
ATTACHMENT F: Comparison of Neighbourhood Support and Engagement in Other Municipalities

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