

RESPONSE BY TOWN OF GIBSONS MAYOR BILL BEAMISH TO COMMENTS MADE BY CAO EMANUEL MACHADO TO COUNCIL ON JUNE 4, 2019

Preamble:

Tonight as I begin my remarks I want to apologize...first to staff for not recognizing the extent of personal stress and injury caused to you by events in recent years and for allowing attacks against staff to continue unchallenged and unresolved; and second to the community for not addressing the loss of trust, confidence and respect that exists for some towards our council and government. We can and will do better.

Today we must acknowledge the past, respond to the present and begin to change our future...to do less will mean more of the same divisive behaviour that has beset Gibsons since 2013.

I am going to preface my remarks by saying thank you...thank you to Council for the support that you have shown to our staff, thank you to the public for their many acts of kindness and thank you to CAO Emanuel Machado for the courage to bring this issue out into the open.

I believe that this current Council became complacent, thinking that we had passed the six-month mark of our tenure without any major issues or controversy and that the acts and actions of the past were behind us.

We were wrong. In hindsight, the first thing that we should have done after being elected was to work with our staff to discuss and address the cumulative impacts of more than 5 years of attacks against their professionalism, their commitment to doing a good job, their abilities and, their knowledge of how best to serve and support this community.

During the past two weeks, there has been an overwhelming public response and support for Mr. Machado and for our staff. Of course, there have also been negative comments. However, on balance I believe that most in our community are tired of the divisiveness and aggressive manner of opposition to almost every project, idea or solution offered in response to applications from developers or for the improvement and maintenance of our community, especially if the infrastructure in question is used in any way by the three big development projects recently approved.

Civil democracy and discourse is almost non-existent, having been replaced by personal attacks on staff, false or misleading statements, and suggestions of corruption or criminal activity.

For some, this negative behaviour also extends to our Town's Natural Asset Program which has been internationally recognized for its progressive, eco-friendly and cost-conscious approach to asset management.

Words matter: incompetent, unprofessional, uneducated, corrupt, criminal, and 'Eco Ass Strategy' have all been used to refer to our CAO and staff in letters, e-mails and publicly at meetings and hearings. Meanwhile, our staff have been consistently recognized elsewhere, including by the Auditor General for Canada, the Union of BC Municipalities, by many other cities and organizations in BC and around the world, and by their peers in local government. Later this month, in fact, Mr. Machado has been invited to go to Halifax to present our Eco-Asset Strategy to a committee of federal and provincial government Ministers from across Canada.

It is unfortunate that such behaviour and name calling does not stop with our staff or council. Recently, I was contacted by a resident who was similarly targeted just for supporting the continuation of fireworks in our Town. This resident stated that she was verbally attacked and abused online, with the result that she became afraid and took down her posts. Is this how we now treat our fellow citizens?

I am also reminded of the article reported in the Coast Reporter on September 5, 2018 wherein Councillor Jeremy Valeriotte recounts his experience on Council. He commented, and I quote, *"...there's the complaining, the mistrust and the personal attacks. It takes a creeping emotional toll: you try to shake it off, but people say some horrible things to each other and it sinks down deep and disturbs you."*

As much as this kind of constant and repetitive behaviour impacts members of Council who are here by choice, it also affects the morale, mental health and stress levels of staff who are constantly challenged, personally and professionally attacked, and blamed for Council decisions over which they have no control.

No-one on Council or on staff disagrees with honest, open, fair and respectful criticism and debate. That should be our goal and our actions should reflect that. At Council, and in our day-to-day interactions with the public, we try our best to model these values and I believe that we succeed. Not only because it is the right thing to do, but because we recognize that to act otherwise results in the kind of divisiveness that we as a community need to leave behind.

The costs of this kind of behaviour are many: financial, over \$300,000 paid in legal bills; personal stress; time lost on projects while staff focus on defending the town in court or responding to unfounded allegations made to the ombudsman or other tribunal; costs to recruit and retain staff; cost to the reputation of our community; and, lost opportunities with respect to decisions

made by many people who are too intimidated or afraid to speak up or to run for Council. Our community reputation has suffered and will continue to suffer until we find a new way forward. Again, I believe that our community does not want to continue down this route.

In a recent letter copied to the Attorney General, the RCMP, the Auditor General for Local Government, the Municipal Insurance Association and the Minister of Municipal Affairs, it was inferred that Council and staff have been involved in activity that warrants criminal investigation. In response, we have contacted each of these organizations and offered to fully cooperate with them, if necessary. A copy of this statement has also been sent to them.

The same letter also stated that the current Council is not open and transparent. However, since taking office in November, our Council has made it a priority to ensure that as much information as we can legally provide is made available on our website with respect to ongoing projects.

Last year, the current Council also amended the Procedure Bylaw to provide an additional opportunity for members of the public to ask questions at Council meetings, and we continue to respond promptly to the many e-mails and questions received from the community every day.

In addition, we have held five advertised budget meetings (which no-one attended), held a sparsely attended budget open house, held two public information sessions on the Prowse Road Lift-Station Project, met with the O'Shea-Oceanmount Community Association and others to discuss the project, and provided reports and information on the town website.

We've also been a regular presence in the community, as we truly recognize the need to be accessible and responsive to our community. In May and June alone, I and members of Council have participated in more than 25 public events besides the regular meetings of council and committees. These included the Home Show, where Councillor Croal, a staff member, and I handed out information and answered questions, as well as the recent Business Walks, in which our CAO, Council and Chamber of Commerce members spent a day conducting surveys at local businesses.

Soon, we plan to engage with the community about our ideas for a new strategic plan and we currently are forming committees to advise council on affordable housing, a tree bylaw and other matters. And, the recently passed budget provides \$10,000 in funding for the installation of the necessary equipment to permit live-streaming of Council and Committee meetings via YouTube.

In short, we are open and transparent, and we will continue to be so.

Moving ahead, I believe we all – Council members, staff and residents – need to re-commit to engaging with each other in a calm, respectful and thoughtful way. We need to abandon “Us Against Them” storylines – as hard as that might be to do – and instead acknowledge and build on what we share: a deep love for our community. If we want different outcomes we must do things differently – starting right now.

We need a new way forward. In that spirit, Council has committed to implementing these Next Steps:

1. Adopt a zero-tolerance policy against bullying and harassment:

Bullying and harassment are never OK and will not be tolerated in any form, in either verbal or written communications. We will not engage with any person who uses bullying or harassment techniques to intimidate, threaten or malign staff or Council.

We will review our current Bullying & Harassment Policy. This policy applies to people who work for the Town, including consultants, and to those who come onto our premises and interact with staff.

We will review the new model Municipal Code of Conduct developed by UBCM, which establishes a set of principles and general standards as starting point for local governments to develop their own code of conduct.

We will review our Procedure Bylaw to ensure that it incorporates best practices with respect to decorum at Council meetings and public hearings.

2. Respond to staff concerns:

As an employer, Council must respond to complaints of stress or bullying and harassment within our organization. The **Workers Compensation Act** requires that we investigate and take appropriate actions. WorkSafeBC recognizes significant workplace stressors such as bullying and harassment and the right of workers to file complaints. In addition, the Town has a bullying and harassment policy that, as Mayor and Council, we are required to follow.

We accept this responsibility and we are going to invest the resources required to engage a consultant to work with our staff. We have already discussed our needs with a Vancouver law firm that specializes in conflict resolution and building a positive workplace culture.

On June 17th, Council met with staff at an all-staff luncheon in Council Chambers to acknowledge staff concerns about the current environment and to reinforce Council’s

commitment to working with them to ensure our shared workplace is one they can all be proud of. We are also committed to fostering an engaged community that respects staff efforts, while participating in constructive dialogue.

3. Reach out to the community with opportunities to dialogue and exchange views about how we can respectfully interact with each other:

As Mayor, I plan to reinstitute the Gibsons Community Dialogue Program, which provides a monthly opportunity for residents to discuss topical issues or concerns. I will participate in these dialogues, along with members of staff and other Councillors who are available to attend.

The first dialogue has been set for Tuesday July 30th at 7:00 PM in Council Chambers, and a regular monthly schedule for these dialogues will be established beginning in September.

I have also been in contact with Arjun Singh, the current President of UBCM, and with Greg Moore, an ex-mayor and former Chair of the Metro Vancouver Board of Directors, to discuss other ways that we can respond to our current situation as a community. I will be sharing the ideas that come out of these discussions with Council in the coming weeks.

4. Continue to be open and transparent in our actions and decision making:

Except where required by the Community Charter or limited by the Access to Information Act or other legislation, we will continue to be open and will transact our business in public.

In closing, I'd like to thank the entire community in advance for their renewed commitment to more respectful engagement and civil discourse, as well as staff for working with us on this important issue. I am confident that, together, we can move beyond current tensions to a more accepting place.

Copies of this statement will be available after this meeting and also posted on the Town of Gibsons' website. Additionally, we plan to publish a brief summary of our commitment to renewing civil discourse within our community in the Coast Reporter this Friday.

Thank you,

Bill Beamish, Mayor