

YEAR IN REVIEW: FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE

Mayor Aaron Stone

In some ways it is hard to believe a whole year has passed since I was sworn in as Mayor on December 1, 2014. This is a time for reflection and an opportunity to share some of the many highlights and impressions from the last 12 months.

I ran on a campaign of “Ask hard questions. Make solid plans. *Let’s build a foundation for our future*”. We have asked a lot of questions over the past year -- probing, detailed, and yes, hard questions. I have learned a lot through the answers to these questions. I have learned just how much work goes into providing core services; water, sewage, garbage pickup and recreational opportunities, keeping roads, sidewalks and parks in good condition, administering bylaws and council meetings, and serving our citizens. I’ve learned that the answers to hard questions aren’t always easy to hear, and I’ve learned that if you want to be successful in making and implementing solid plans, you need to take the time to lay a solid foundation first.

Economic development remains a priority, and Council wants to stimulate investment and business success in our local economy. I am very encouraged that after a review of economic development at the Regional District, it looks as though there may be funds available to directly support economic development projects in CVRD communities like Ladysmith. Once we endorse the CVRD direction, we will move ahead with an updated economic development strategy for Ladysmith, making sure all the key players are at the table.

We are investing in our downtown in a number of ways. The Gatacre Street project, although the cause of some disruption through construction, is a significant improvement featuring new sidewalks, curbs and gutters. The Town also made an important investment in the future of our downtown core by purchasing a block of properties from the Ladysmith and District Credit Union on Buller Street and First Avenue. This will eventually be the site of a new City Hall. In the meantime, we are very pleased that the Ladysmith Museum can continue to enjoy its home on First Avenue. We continue to explore other opportunities for interim uses for this site, which may include public space, overflow parking and/or other supporting amenities.

One of the most important things I learned soon after being sworn in as Mayor is just how much we need to invest in the Town’s **infrastructure**. This area is where we made some of the greatest progress this year, as well as some of our toughest decisions. Our new, state-of-the-art waste water (sewage) treatment plant is well underway and on track to be in service in 2016. This is the largest capital project the Town has ever undertaken. We also need to install a new water filtration system as mandated by Island Health to ensure we continue to provide safe drinking water for our citizens and neighbours, and are hopeful we will get grant funding to help with this big project. Both City Hall and the Fire Hall need to be upgraded or replaced. Roads, sidewalks, sewer and water systems need ongoing maintenance and repairs. Faced with this reality, we decided to set aside five per cent of taxation revenues for asset replacement. This was the responsible thing to do. It was also a very difficult decision, as it meant we had to increase taxes, and no one on Council wanted to do that.

It was a tough decision, but now we now have a framework to proceed with investments in ongoing maintenance and renewal of our assets and infrastructure, supported by reserves that are being built up to help pay for it. Next we will update related plans and policies, including the Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan; Pavement Strategy; and, Development Cost Charges.

Awareness of our **water supply** came to the forefront this year with the summer drought. Thanks to your efforts and the early introduction of Stage 3 water restrictions across the entire Cowichan Region, we retained about the same amount of water in our reservoir as in 2014, despite the lack of rain. Council adopted a water conservation policy, with a target to reduce consumption to 200 litres per day per person, a reduction of 20 per cent. The Town is very active in a new initiative that should lead to the creation of an inclusive, multi-party Ladysmith Watershed Steering Committee with representatives from the general public, landowners, the Town, the business community and First Nations. We have had an initial public meeting and the subsequent work is showing good progress. Watch for more news early in 2016.

The state of the **Ladysmith Harbour and our waterfront** is an ongoing concern, and here too we have made progress this year. We are working with the province and Stz'uminus First Nation on plans to improve the environmental and economic health of the harbour. This also involves removing the derelict and abandoned vessels in DL 651 (the 'Dogpatch'). Although the Town doesn't have direct jurisdiction over the area (it belongs to the province), our Zoning Bylaw does apply, and it doesn't permit vessels to be moored there for more than seven days. In moving to clean up the Harbour, we also want to be sensitive to the area's residents. We are forming a stakeholder group made up of residents, community members, First Nations and other users of the harbour to address concerns and find a workable and sustainable solution.

I am also very pleased with our new nuisance abatement and property maintenance bylaws, which clearly identify nuisances in the form of properties, noise, graffiti and other disturbances that affect your ability to enjoy your own property. Most important, they provide bylaw officials and the RCMP with the tools they need to take real action on chronic nuisance properties. Once a property is designated a nuisance property by Council, the cost of services such as numerous police calls can be recovered through the offending property's taxes under this new system. Since the introduction of these bylaws, one of the worst offending properties in the community is now boarded up.

One of the most rewarding things in the last year for me personally has been the growth of a genuinely warm and respectful relationship with Chief John Elliott and the Stz'uminus First Nation. As we move ahead on projects that will benefit both our communities – harbour clean-up, economic development and cultural celebration to name a few -- we are learning to appreciate our differences and embrace our similarities and shared goals.

It was also important to me that we engage more citizens, be more inclusive and transparent, and communicate effectively with more of you. The Town is now active on Facebook, and we will be doing more social media in the coming year. We will also start streaming and archiving video of our Council meetings. I'm very pleased at the increase in attendance at Council meetings from people who are

genuinely interested in what goes on in general at our meetings, as well as those who are there for a specific issue.

I want to keep hearing from you. I want you to ask hard questions of me and Council. I want you to keep giving us your input. The answers we give you may not always be easy to hear, but I hope you will see that we do indeed listen and consider your views.

Looking forward, we are nearly finished our new strategic plan (more details on that early in the new year) with our priorities for 2016 and beyond. We have worked hard in the past year and I am proud of what we have accomplished. I will admit that some things haven't moved as fast as I – and perhaps you – might have expected, but I can tell you we are building the foundation and making solid long-term plans that will pay off in real progress for our community.