ACRD/Bamfield Community Affairs Executive Committee – Bamfield Sewer Referendum Debrief

Tuesday, December 17, 2024 – 6:30pm – 8pm

Community Affair Executive Committee
James Willock
Susan Derasp
Bob Schmitt
Jan Teversham
Stella Wenstob
Jaleen Rousseau

ACRD Staff

Heather Zenner
Wendy Hayes
Jenny Brunn

Elected Officials
Bob Beckett

Heather Zenner shared the results of an internal debrief that took place at the staff level.

- High voter turnout for mailout ballots
- Plenty of voting opportunities (East, West, ACRD office, Mail Ballots)
- High voter turnout overall
- Utilized retired, experienced staff
- Province was helpful in dealing with potential mail strike
- Challenging to send a mailout with low amount of PO Box numbers
- Costly advertising in the AV News which does not reach most Bamfield Residents (legislatively required).
- Many unhappy people regarding Elections BC rules of businesses not allowed to vote, and renters allowed to vote
- Couriered mail ballots to electors to ensure they received their ballots (avoiding Canada Post strike). This was an added expense, but doable for a small number of mail ballots
- Going forward hold referendum during better weather season (early fall, spring)

Bob Beckett Update

- Thankful to everyone for attending
- Acknowledged that Elections BC rules are complicated with respect to referendums. (Corporations and their inability to vote and renters ability to vote etc).

Heather Zenner indicated that past resolutions have been brought to the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) to discuss Elections BC voting rules, however, this topic did not proceed.

Jenny Brunn explained that all electors need to be given a chance to vote in a democratic process and that includes:

- allowing renters to vote in general elections and referendums.
- disallowing corporations the right to vote in general elections and referendums.

The Elections BC rules are not perfect; however, they are what the ACRD is required to follow.
A Corporate Vote Discussion Paper can be found here if you are interested in learning more:
https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/local-governments/governance-powers/corporate_vote_discussion_paper.pdf

Stella indicated that she was initially concerned with the Elections BC rules but then felt differently as corporations are a different dynamic.

Bob Schmitt indicated that it depends on the type of service being voted on, as to who should vote.

James requested that if there is any further discussion about Elections BC rules and sending resolutions to UBCM, that it first be discussed with the Bamfield community.

Bob Beckett identified that beyond this project and going forward that it is important for him to understand how the community as a whole, feels about a particular initiative.

Jaleen this was a challenging topic. There is a sense of mistrust of the ACRD and a lack of understanding of the process leading up to this referendum. Thinks increased consultation is great but more explanation of process is required, which could be used to manage the mistrust.

Jan enquired if staff were surprised at the outcome of the referendums?

Jenny indicated that we as staff remain neutral and don't know the answer. We are utilizing the referendum to determine the community's desire. We needed to ask the question because we don't know the desire of the community. The criticism might have been worse if we hadn't gone through the process.

Stella indicated that it felt like we jumped to a referendum to quickly. What is the process? Thinks it would be better to spend more money on the soft process at the beginning, before getting to a referendum. Indicated the last environmental consultation work that was done in the Bamfield Inlet was completed so long ago that she questioned how much value it served. Stella also enquired about the West Bamfield Dock and questioned some of the remarks made by other directors at the last ACRD Board meeting.

James indicated that it would be nice to find another mechanism to determine community interest as it was clear from his perspective that the referendum votes would be a 'no'. If the focus of sewer project was related to the environment, perhaps there should have been a systematic process to focus on the systems that directly flow into the Bamfield Inlet vs focusing on all properties in the services area (that include functioning septic systems). If the sewer referendum question was related to direct outfall into the Bamfield Inlet, there would likely have been a different answer.

Bob Beckett was confident once the pricing was determined that the community would not support the referendums. His hope however had been that maybe the collective could have persuaded Huu-ay-aht to reduce the cost to the community. Interested in finding a process to gauge community interest that is inexpensive, fair, equitable, and with accurate information (and not a referendum). Not sure what the answer is.

Jenny stated that when it comes to direct discharge, as a Regional District we can establish a service but we do not have the authority to regulate systems. We can work with VIHA to address septic system concerns.

James asked what was the trigger to start this and why would Huu-ay-aht want to collect and how it would benefit them?

Jenny indicated that the construction of the Wastewater Treatment Plan was the impetus for starting this initiative. We had originally only anticipated a potential service for East Bamfield, however there was minimal financial cost to add West Bamfield to the referendum. Her perspective, there were so many potential benefits including community sewer collection allowing for increased density, resulting in affordable housing options. Made sense with the economy of scale.

Bob Beckett indicated that late in his first term as the Bamfield Director, HFN Business came to meet with him to discuss if Bamfield would be interested in hooking to their sewer system? Bob also stated that folks from Bamfield who were interested in subdividing their property contacted him to discuss the opportunity for sewer collection. Bob indicated to Huu-ay-aht that it would depend on cost and if the community supported this initiative.

Bob Schmitt felt Jenny did an incredible job with the community engagement however it was always the same 12-15 people who showed up to the meetings so how do you get to the rest of the community? Also shared that it felt like many in the community did not start paying attention to this initiative until the end of August (when it started to get real).

Heather indicated that is something that ACRD struggles with on a regular basis. It is difficult to determine community interest, but we utilize multiple methods including in-person engagement and online engagement (zoom, surveys, social media, etc.) but we recognize that we aren't hearing from the whole community.

Bob Beckett responded to Stella's comments regarding the West Side Dock. We have been working on the dock for about two years, there was a non-disclosure agreement while we negotiated and tried to find grants. Recently the board has allowed us to pursue these grants. Is going to work on communication.

Jaleen expressed appreciation to Bob Beckett and his work. Even though I understand how complex things are, if there was more of an effort to show how their money is being spent, what the ACRD is doing, it may go a long way and work towards building trust. Also indicated that the documents that ACRD shared with the community were confusing and suggested that video be considered as a better way to share complicated ideas with the community.

James questioned what the next steps would be and highlighted that communication is key. Suggested celebrating and sharing what the ACRD is doing. Also suggested that the Bamfield OCP is out of date and that sewer should have been reviewed in terms of the OCP review. What future initiatives could we take with the ACRD? Agreed with Jaleen's comments regarding the sewer initiative information being confusing. James did a lot of work to simplify this information and shared with the Bamfield Community.

Jenny appreciated James for all of the work he did to support communications with the Bamfield Community.

Recommendations:

1) Ensure Official Community Plan for Bamfield remains current and is utilized to look at further topics like sewer.

2) Consider using video as a way to engage with the community. The community is more likely to watch a short video that to visit a webpage or to review paper copies of information.

3) Consider putting an advertisement in the 'the New Bamfielder' (Bamfielder.ca) as a secondary way to notify the community of ACRD initiatives.

4) Staff will research developing an 'ACRD Notice Bylaw', allowing to change the legislative requirements to advertise in the Alberni Valley News, and utilize alternative methods of advertising.

5) The Bamfield Community Affairs Executive can submit a written summary of recent Community Affairs meetings (or meeting minutes/notes), that can be presented to the ACRD Bamfield Area Community Services meetings. 2025 meetings are February 18, May 20, August 19, and November 18. Summary can be emailed to ACRD staff at administration@acrd.bc.ca one week before each meeting, so that the documents can be included in the agenda.

6) ACRD to consider additional ways of communicating to Bamfield on the services and benefit that ACRD provides to Bamfield.

7) ACRD CAO and Director Beckett to have discussions on ways to gauge community interest in new initiatives.