

Report

Date December 12, 2023 File:
Subject Supplemental Net New Staffing Request – Planning Technician

PURPOSE

To consider funding for a Planning Technician position in the 2024 Operating Budget.

BACKGROUND

The Planning and Building Department delivers land use planning services. The Department is organized into four teams – Building Inspections, Community Planning, Development Planning and Administrative Support. The Development Planning team comprises a Development Planning Coordinator and three Development Planners. One of the Planners on the Community Planning team also supports Development Planning (0.4 FTE).

Development Planning is primarily responsible for implementing and administering land use policies and regulations. Duties of the Development Planning team include:

- Processing development applications (OCP amendments, rezonings, development permits, development variance permits, temporary use permits, Agriculture Land Commission applications, Board of Variance, temporary mobile home permits, telecommunication tower applications).
- Responding to internal and external application referrals (subdivision, building permits, business licenses, special event permits, sign permits, blasting permits, soil deposit and removal applications, liquor and cannabis license applications, Mines Act applications).
- Informing prospective applicants, landowners, and the public about land use policies and regulations, development approval processes, current applications and in-stream development.
- Receive and respond to complaints about potential bylaw violations, initiate bylaw enforcement where appropriate, and work with landowners to achieve compliance.
- Reviewing and updating informational materials, bylaws, regulations, and land use and development policies.

DISCUSSION

Request Rationale:

The Development Planning team responds to over 6,000 enquiries per year from the public. They range from simple questions that can be answered in a few minutes to very complex problems that may take many days to resolve. Like most local governments, North Cowichan prioritizes public service and expects staff to be available during regular business hours to assist the public with issues and questions and respond promptly. Providing this level of service means that, depending on workloads, other departmental duties may receive less priority.

Council provided additional resources in the 2023 budget (contract planning services and a new development planner position) to help reduce the development application backlog and improve application processing timelines. Those additional resources have helped to reduce the backlog of development applications and improve service levels for development applicants. However, the development planners still spend approximately 25-30% of their time on general enquiries and work unrelated to development application files. The proposed Planning Technician position is intended to maintain service levels for the public and improve service levels for development applicants by allowing the development planners to focus more of their time on development application files and less on general enquiries.

Recent legislation enacted by the Provincial Government (Housing Statutes Amendment Acts) will significantly change what property owners may do with their property. The Planning and Building Department has already seen an increase in enquiries from the public related to those changes, and the trend is expected to increase in 2024. The Planning Technician position is expected to help the public and North Cowichan manage the changing regulatory landscape, including facilitating new housing in this community.

Summary of Duties:

The following duties would be assigned to the Planning Technician if that position is established:

- On duty to respond to phone calls, e-mails, and front counter enquiries from the public;
- Provide preliminary instruction and advice to prospective development applicants;
- Provide departmental input on business license applications;
- Review and comment on building permit applications;
- Process minor development applications (e.g., Board of Variance, temporary trailer permits);
- Respond to file review requests;
- Respond to special event permit referrals;
- Prepare graphics and other visual communication material;
- Monitor and maintain Planning pages of the website; and,
- Support the development planning team with research and participation in planning projects.

Resource Requirements:

Based on the current collective agreement, the position's estimated cost is \$100,000, including benefits. As the position will not be filled until April 2024, the cost in 2024 is expected to be \$77,000, including benefits.

In addition to the direct cost of wages and benefits, additional expenses of \$5,000 to \$8,000 per year are anticipated for creating and maintaining a workstation, training, professional memberships, and other incidental costs incurred with additional staff.

Alignment with Council's Strategic Plan:

- Service – Maintaining the existing high level of service in the community
- Service – Ensure open and transparent communications with the public
- Housing – Explore opportunities for new forms of housing
- Community – Continue to implement existing neighbourhood plans

OPTIONS

1. **(Recommended Option)** THAT the Committee of the Whole direct staff to include the Planning Technician position in the 2024 Operating Budget.
2. (Alternate Option) THAT the Committee of the Whole direct staff to bring forward the Planning Technician position for consideration during a future budget process after a Development Application Service Review has been completed.
3. (Alternate Option) THAT the Committee of the Whole direct staff to bring forward the request for a Planning Technician position to a future budget process.

IMPLICATIONS

Authorizing the Planning Technician position will allow the department to maintain a high level of service to the public and increase capacity for processing development application files.

If the position is not authorized, Development Planning staff will continue to provide services to the public and balance their time between development application files, general enquiries, and other duties. If public enquiries increase because of new housing legislation or other reasons, application processing capacity may be impacted.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Committee of the Whole direct staff to include the Planning Technician position in the 2024 Operating Budget.

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