

Report

Date January 17, 2024
Subject Generic Emails to Council

File:

PURPOSE

To obtain direction from Council with respect to the receipt of emails from unidentified or unidentifiable individuals.

BACKGROUND

At the October 4, 2023 Special Closed Council meeting, following the receipt of a particularly hateful email to Council, Council resolved to direct staff to prepare a report on managing anonymous public submissions to Council.

Current Procedure

In November 2018, a process for distributing correspondence to Council was established, which consolidated all correspondence, invitations, newsletters, media releases and other information into a weekly Info Package delivered to Council on Thursday afternoons. The Info Package included correspondence received through the mail, dropped at the Municipal Office or sent in by email to council@northcowichan.ca or info@northcowichan.ca.

Emails received through these accounts were triaged by the Communications and Public Engagement department, who sent out replies and acknowledgements to senders when appropriate. Emails which required a technical response were then forwarded to the appropriate staff person for response. The staff response was also included in the Info Package, sometimes in the same package where Council received the original email.

Because there was concern over the delay on receiving correspondence through the Info Package and confusion [and some inconsistencies] on how correspondence was brought forward to be included in an agenda package, a pause was placed on this process.

At the October 7, 2020, Regular Council meeting it was resolved:

1. That Council authorize a Consent Agenda to be presented at the beginning of a meeting, allowing items to be removed from the Consent Agenda on the request of any member; and that items not removed may be adopted by general consent without debate, and further that removed items are placed on the regular meeting agenda under New Business.
2. That Council direct staff to permanently cease distribution of the Council Info Package.
3. That the Council@northcowichan.ca email is automatically redirected to each member of Council and copied to the Executive Assistant.

By contrast, mail or other documents received at Municipal Hall or emailed to one of the more generic email addresses, such as info@northcowichan.ca are received and reviewed by a staff member first

before being forwarded to Council, if applicable.

DISCUSSION

Forwarding the emails directly to all of Council provides more instant access to all of Council helping ensure that all of Council has the same information at the same time but also imparts a sense of urgency, adds to the workload of staff and Council, and provides no mechanism for screening potentially hateful or disrespectful messages.

All emails sent to Council are responded to with a message advising the sender that the email has been received and letting the sender know any further action that will be undertaken. If the email is referred to staff, staff also respond with a copy to Council, resulting in three total emails to Council (the original email, the standard response, the ultimate response). Sometimes these emails are of a technical nature that staff would have addressed perhaps even without response if the message had been received by telephone or email to one of the other generic email addresses.

Most email software allows rules to be established that address the routing of messages containing specific key words. However, as emails are sent to Council on a wide variety of topics and from a wide variety of email addresses, it is impossible to establish a rule that would work in all circumstances. Additionally, emails cannot be blocked as there are legislative requirements regarding the receipt of public input on particular items that may be infringed upon if a blanket rule regarding a particular type of email address is established (i.e. blocking proton email addresses).

The Consent Agenda Policy specifies that anonymous submissions will not be included in the Consent Agenda, however, these emails still go to Council regardless of whether the topic is germane to local governments or whether the writer expresses themselves in a respectful manner.

OPTIONS

1. **(Recommended Option)** THAT Council direct staff to create an online form for the public to provide feedback to Council.
 - An online form can have mandatory fields such as name and address. This will prevent anonymous submissions to Council and may counteract some of the hateful messages that people may send under the cover of anonymity. It may also encourage people to really consider the feedback they are providing and their reasons for doing so as they would need to take a bit more time to fill the form out and would not be anonymous.
 - However, an online form is less accessible for people with difficulty filling out forms and staff time would be required to read and forward the information to Council.
2. THAT Council direct staff to review messages sent to Council@northcowichan.ca before forwarding to Council.
 - This would require staff to read the messages and follow pre-established rules or make judgements about which emails do not follow the Respectful Spaces Bylaw or Code of Conduct Policy and emails that are regarding issues not germane to local governments.
 - Messages sent to Council may not be received by Council for some time as staff may not be

able to get to the emails right away.

3. Do nothing.

- Most emails sent to Council are regarding an issue within the Municipality. Council could delete messages that are not relevant.

IMPLICATIONS

Staff review and draft responses to all emails sent to Council regardless of whether the emails are received by Council immediately. Any change to the process will result in the messages not being received by Council right away but could also result in less messages being sent to Council.

Should Council want to know the name and address of individuals expressing their thoughts, an online form would provide the easiest means of achieving this goal.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council direct staff to create an online form for the public to provide feedback to Council.

Report prepared by:



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Approved to be forwarded to Council:



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