

COMOX STRATHCONA WASTE MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Minutes from the meeting held on February 1, 2024 via Zoom,
commencing at 1:30 pm

PRESENT:

D. Hadfield, Director of Operations	City of Campbell River
K. Shaw, Director of Public Works	City of Courtenay
G. Kreek, Acting Director of Finance	Town of Comox
C. Perry, Manager of Public Works	Town of Comox
S. Fisher, Engineering Services Coordinator	Strathcona Regional District
M. Tatchell, Chief Administrative Officer	Village of Tahsis
R. Crisfield, Manager of Operations	Village of Cumberland
S. Veselinovic, Manager of Operations	HIWMC
M. Rutten, General Manager of Engineering Services	CVRD
V. Schau, Senior Manager of CSWM Services	CVRD
S. Willie, Manager of Solid Waste Planning and Policy Development	CVRD
B. Meagher, Branch Assistant – Engineering Services	CVRD

ITEMS:

Minutes

The committee reviewed the minutes of the January 4, 2024 Comox Strathcona Waste Management Advisory Committee meeting and no errors or omissions were noted.

Draft Staff Report: 2024-2028 CSWM Financial Plan

V. Schau provided an overview of the 2024-2028 CSWM Recommended Financial Plan, highlighting it had not changed from proposed with the exception of the error in the 2028 operating contract, as well as the reduction of support services (reflected in the previous report and formalized in the recommended budget). At the January 11 Board meeting, some Directors expressed concern over low transfers to reserves with higher value capital projects coming up.

Responding to these concerns, our staff revisited future contributions to reserves.

The taxation and tipping revenue will remain unchanged for 2024, as well as for the proposed budget for 2025-2028. Effort was made to enhance transfer to reserves. As we're finalizing year end, the adjustment to the 2024 surplus is roughly \$3 million.

The reallocation to reserve helps strengthen our financial position and addresses the concerns raised by some of the Directors.

The recommended budget acknowledges the importance of reserves for future capital infrastructure and managing the debt load. There are two options being put forward to the Board. Staff recommends approving the first option emphasizing the incorporation of Board feedback and adjustments in the 2024-2028 CSWM Recommended Financial Plan.

While the current financial plan doesn't propose a tax increase for 2024, staff presented an Option 2 which details an alternate plan allowing for a more gradual increase in taxation, to keep with CPI, to increase reserve contributions to meet our longer-term asset management requirements. CFO indicated the CPI increase would likely be in the range of 3.5 percent for the next one to two years, reflected in the figures for 2025 and 2026, with a subsequent adjustment down to 2.5 percent for 2027.

Advisory comments:

Strathcona Regional District – Can you clarify that you're recommending option one to approve the existing financial plan, rather than option two to include the tax increase? What is the rationale behind not recommending option two when that clearly indicate it improves CSWM's financial position?

The recommendation from staff stems from Directors' feedback, expressing a preference to maintain the current plan. Despite this, we presented alternative options to offer a comprehensive financial perspective. This recommendation is made with the understanding that a more thorough financial analysis will be presented to the Board after determining new services and programs resulting from the solid waste management plan renewal process.

It is important to note, there was no explicit direction from Directors to increase revenue, whether through requisition or tipping fees. However, concerns about underfunded reserves were acknowledged, prompting staff to explore revenue-increasing options. Ultimately, the decision was made to increase the tipping fee on January 1, 2024. During the roundtable session in mid-2023, there was very clear direction from the Board not to increase tax requisition.

Rather than proposing a recommendation for a mid-year revenue increase, we presented various options and delved into the details of what a tax requisition could entail. Despite meeting reserve contribution requirements this year with the surplus, it was emphasized that our budget might not be sufficient for future reserve contributions.

Strathcona Regional District – Is it your precedent to always recommend an option in these reports if you're presenting multiple options?

Not always. Sometimes we leave it open, but most of the time we are making a recommendation.

Strathcona Regional District – Acknowledge that both the staff and the Board invested significant effort in boosting revenue primarily through tipping fees rather than tax requisition. There's a perception that a staff recommendation may lean towards further requisition increases. The SRD is committed to endorsing the option that optimally supports the service, even if it might not align with popular sentiments among Directors. The SRD found it somewhat unexpected to encounter a recommendation for option one, given previous discussions.

Staff indicated that we have opportunity during the SWMP process to ascertain future revenue needs. While a bit more revenue currently would be beneficial, we are comfortable waiting until we have a clearer understanding, allowing us to make well-founded recommendations for revenue in the subsequent year.

Verbal Update: Cortes Island Transfer Station Free Store Funding Request

V. Schau updated the Board on Director Vonesch's resolution to allocate \$1500 for a roof repair on the Cortes Island free store. Free stores fall outside the CSWM mandate, operating independently like the one on Hornby Island. Despite being on Crown Land leased to CSWM (CVRD), the Cortes Island free store lacks formal structure and liability insurance. Our insurance company, MIABC, clarified no coverage exists for the Free Store beyond what is covered under the CSWM service.

Building concerns and upgrades needed prompt code compliance questions. While not within CSWM's current mandate, it's under review with the SWMP renewal. Funding ahead of SWMP outcomes would complicate matters; thus, CSWM service funding isn't recommended. Staff propose seeking alternate funds, potentially through SRD's grant-in-aid program or exploring local businesses, sponsors, or community fundraising due to the urgency of the repair need.

Advisory comments:

City of Campbell River – Agreed with the suggestion of an SRD grant, although it's not a timely answer to the issue.

Staff asked for any further suggestions for funding options.

Village of Tahsis – Curious about CSWM providing sea can structures for composting pilots. What distinguishes composting sea cans from a free store structure?

The composting component currently falls under the CSWM mandate as outlined in one of the SWMP's three objectives. However, free store services, such as those in Tahsis, Gold River, Sayward, Zeballos, and Hornby Island, operate independently outside the CSWM mandate, though their inclusion is part of ongoing SWMP discussions. This distinction was emphasized during the options analysis in December. While not currently under the mandate, there is potential for inclusion in the future.

In contrast, the composting pilot projects, initiated in response to Board interest, were recommended several years ago. The pilot program, involving communities like Tahsis and Quadra Island, was implemented to explore opportunities for smaller communities unable to partake in the regional organics project. The sea cans with composters inside were a result of organized and recommended Board direction, differing from the situation with free stores. It's definitely different from the free store situation.

Village of Tahsis – Understood and agreed. For the municipalities with free stores or in electoral areas where the CVRD has some responsibilities, their liability insurance policy written by MIABC should presumably cover it?

Staff highlighted the distinctive aspect of Cortes Island's free store, emphasizing the absence of a formal organization overseeing it. The operation relies on self-appointed volunteers, presenting a challenge as it doesn't fit the conventional model of a non-profit organization eligible for liability insurance and grants from other government levels. While the absence of formal organization doesn't guarantee funding even if established, it would certainly enhance their ability to secure funds from various agencies.

Strathcona Regional District – This funding request has already come to the SRD informally. Since they are not a registered non-profit organization, it was determined they were ineligible for funding. Also, it's not an SRD building or asset.

Staff noted the suggestions and will finalize the report to go to the Board next week.

NEW BUSINESS:

V. Schau noted that the Tahsis agreement is finalized and ready for signature. Following procurement policy, it will return to the Board, as the previous direction covered only the original agreement, not subsequent extensions. This is more of a formality, and we intend to honor the negotiated rates. The agreement is in progress and is expected to be on the next Board agenda.

Village of Tahsis – Thanked staff for the information and will let Mayor Davis know.

City of Courtenay – Had a question about Table 1 in the financial plan regarding the three items for fleet vehicle replacement, equipment replacement (roll off bins), and equipment purchase (screener). They understand the fleet vehicle replacement is probably funded by reserve. Are the other two assets, equipment replacement and purchase, funded through reserve or will they in future be contributing to their own replacement value through reserve contribution as part of their annual cost? They would like to clarify the funding source for procurement and replacement for this equipment.

Staff will check into this query and get back to the group.

City of Courtenay – They sent a request about material acceptance within the organics facility processing. There have been many public enquiries since embarking on fully automated waste collection. Residents who've moved to the Comox Valley from other regions have expectations based on the services from where they lived previously on the Lower Mainland or out of province. They share concerns that our material acceptance isn't as broad as it is elsewhere. They want info about why certain materials are not accepted such as compostable plastics. The request is for the CVRD to provide robust and specific information about which materials are accepted and why or why not, especially with regard to compostable plastic.

Staff is actively finalizing our messaging regarding compostable plastics. Previous communication stated non-acceptance due to material variability, with considerations for truly compostable bags, mainly cellulose-based and found in local retailers. However, testing reveals that these bags only meet the OMRR standard at 58 degrees for 120 days, whereas our requirement is 55 degrees for six days. Currently, trials are ongoing for various compostable materials to potentially revisit our no-liner policy.

Feedback on waste containment concerns has prompted the exploration of different liners. The Ministry has warned of upcoming stringent guidelines for emerging contaminants like PFAS, found in compostable liners. Being a new facility, we were advised not to accept this material initially. Trials continue to offer clearer guidance. The delay is regrettable, but we prioritize diligence in testing to ensure accurate messaging and prevent accepting materials that don't meet OMRR requirements.

City of Courtenay – They appreciate the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of describing what is acceptable. They would like to communicate with retailers and confirm the cellulose-based liners are not acceptable for our facility within the current process.

Staff recognizes some people will use these bags and they hope to work with the City of Courtenay and Town of Comox to provide further guidance. The current communication asserts a no-liner policy, aligning with the CVRD stance. Efforts are underway to find solutions that make participation in the organics program more accessible for residents, recognizing that difficulty may lead to organic waste being disposed of in the regular garbage. If it's hard for people, they will put organics in the garbage.

City of Courtenay – They don't necessarily want to change the no-liner stance. The challenge is our local retailers selling the bags under the presumption they're compostable because they're cellulose-based when they're not an approved product. In order to manage contamination by households, we need to provide clear and succinct messaging to the public.

Staff asked if it's worthwhile to take the time to test different products to see if they're compostable, or whether it's better to stick with the original requirements where no liners of any kind are acceptable? Is that more valuable than waiting several months for us to evaluate different liners?

City of Courtenay – They appreciate the clarification. They suggest it probably would be easier to stick with the original requirements. They struggle with contamination, education and enforcement on all fronts whether from an organics or recycling perspective. Providing residents with the clearest most succinct messaging is the most advantageous option in the long run. Introducing new items in future is one thing, but having unclear messaging about what's acceptable and what's not is very challenging.

Village of Cumberland – If you introduce new acceptable products, you'll always have the issue of people starting to use other non-compostable materials. It may be better not to introduce new products at all.

Staff are under pressure to allow a type of liner other than paper. This concern may ease once green waste starts up in Spring. The Village of Cumberland and Town of Comox may offer valuable insights into this matter, given their extensive experience. Both Cumberland and the Town of Comox have successfully implemented similar practices without significant issues. While there is general receptiveness to a broader organics mix, the primary challenge remains the transition from emptying the kitchen bin to the larger cart.

Village of Cumberland – You might attract some people to participate in the kitchen organics with compostable plastic bags, but you create another issue with people

possibly using products that aren't compostable. If you say bags are allowed, people may use all sorts of bags.

City of Courtenay – We want to support the organics program and prevent people from developing an ongoing pattern of behavior where they're misusing the service. Municipalities such as Cumberland and Comox have been doing this for years and have probably developed patterns of behaviour. We contribute a significant volume of material to the service and have the ability to sway the viability of the product in any one direction. If big box retailers such as Costco sell those cellulose liners, they'll make an impact. They need a letter from us or the CVRD asking them to pull the product off the shelf, or to at least say the product is not compatible and needs to be used in another fashion.

Staff will work with our community educator to get the messaging out there. We want the resident participation in the program, but we're dealing with disposing of contaminated compost. For instance, the Quality Foods compostable bags are not compostable. They've been asked to look for alternatives but are still in circulation; they may be running out their inventory.

Village of Cumberland – Agree it's a problematic product as it ultimately ends up in the landfill.

Staff will confirm our messaging with the group first and then have our community educator work on disseminating it. The message will likely be no liners, just paper bags.

Town of Comox – While the testing is underway, you need a complete ban of any plastic in the organics. If certain plastics are approved in future, it needs to be an explicit model number or SKU number. They agree with the Village of Cumberland about the risk of opening up the option of plastic bags. It was a different composting process when Comox and Cumberland were in the pilot project.

Staff clarified that it's been the same Gore process for pilot, plastic bags are never allowed but at the time, there wasn't the resource to back the education effort.

Town of Comox – There's been a lot more emphasis since we transitioned over to the new facility about not allowing plastics. I don't remember seeing anything about which compostable bags were approved previously.

Staff noted that we weren't under the stringent guidelines of OMRR with the tonnage of the pilot project. The new facility is OMRR permitted and we need to meet that threshold to move product out the door. It's the same contamination we had before,

but we didn't have the same level of education and resources for messaging as we do for this regional campaign. It was always a problem, just not to this degree.

Town of Comox – Agree with the City of Courtenay about needing a letter to the retailers on CSWM letterhead stating no compostable plastic is acceptable for the facility and asking them to stop selling it.

Staff agree we should support what the municipalities need and provide clarity that no liners are acceptable. We can be clear in the future if some other product does work out.

Town of Comox – We could let retailers know a product is approved for organics in future with the exact SKU or product information.

Staff will verify the messaging with the municipalities before disseminating it. They plan to hand-deliver letters to them and engage in conversations with retailers.

Similarly, there is a notable issue with contamination, and efforts are underway in collaboration with Emterra to address it. This necessitates a comprehensive educational approach as contamination is observed across all routes. Is there any information available regarding when Emterra will acquire the new trucks equipped for monitoring the collected materials?

City of Courtenay – There's no definitive answer. It may be April, May or June. You can expect it sometime in the spring. Waiting for a delivery of the chassis.

Town of Comox – This could be a topic for the municipalities to discuss regarding Emterra's contractual obligations to identify contamination. It may involve them stepping out of the trucks and inspecting the containers by lifting the lids before dumping.

City of Courtenay – They would be happy to include others in their conversations with contractors around that.

Staff thanked participants for the conversation and will follow up with them.

GENERAL:

The next Comox Strathcona Waste Management Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for February 22, 2024 at 1:30 pm.

TERMINATION:

The meeting terminated at 2:18 pm.

Recorded by:

B. Meagher

B. Meagher
Information Centre Assistant,
Corporate Services

Certified correct:

V. Schau

Vivian Schau
Senior Manager of CSWM Services