

Accountability and Transparency Committee

RE: Public Comment Meeting Policy and its Relationship with the Public Comment Period in the Procedural By-law

Dear Madame Chair and Committee Members:

The cornerstone of any democracy is the ability of its citizens to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. Unfortunately, Procedural Bylaw 2023-62 risks undermining this principle. I am here to address the limitations placed on deputations and public comments in Sections 13.2, 13.4, and 13.5 of the bylaw regarding matters that have already been subject to a public meeting. Specifically, I take issue with a rule that prevents residents from addressing Council verbally on follow-up staff reports or recommendations stemming from those meetings.

This restriction, while perhaps intended to streamline meetings, inadvertently silences the public at critical junctures in the decision-making process. It is my belief that this rule not only diminishes the transparency and inclusivity of our governance, but also runs counter to our democratic values.

The procedural bylaw, as it stands, limits public engagement by prohibiting verbal comments after a public meeting, even when follow-up staff reports or recommendations introduce significant new or evolving information. For example, in matters like development proposals, where public feedback often highlights concerns, the subsequent staff report recommendations may substantially differ from what was initially discussed. This highlights a critical gap: follow-up discussions and changes introduced after the public meeting often necessitate additional verbal comments, which the current rule unjustly precludes. Preventing residents from verbally responding to these changes by way a deputation or public comment undermines their ability to meaningfully participate.

This rule assumes that public input during a public meeting is sufficient to address all concerns. However, this assumption fails to account for the iterative nature of governance, where initial public comments focus on high-level concerns, and follow-up discussions at Council or Committee of the Whole meetings often delve into details that require additional input. This disconnect leaves critical gaps in public participation and raises an important question: Shouldn't the democratic process prioritize hearing voices at every stage of decision-making?

Deputations, for example, provide an opportunity for immediate clarification, dialogue, and direct interaction with Council. Written correspondence, while valuable, cannot replicate

this dynamic exchange, especially on nuanced or technical matters. Deputations bring a more human element to the discussion, allowing Council to attach a face to the name and hear the tone behind the context, which written correspondence simply cannot convey.

Further compounding the issue is the inconsistent enforcement of this rule. It has rarely been invoked, yet, at a recent Council meeting, a resident was initially barred from public comments due to the matter having been the subject of a public meeting but was later allowed to speak by the Chair. Such inconsistencies create confusion and erode trust in the governance process, further highlighting the need for clarity and fairness.

I urge this Committee to revisit this aspect of Procedural Bylaw 2023-62. Specifically, the clause in sections 13.2, 13.4, and 13.5 prohibiting deputations or public comments on matters that have been the subject of a public meeting. In short, this wording should be removed. Revising the bylaw would ensure that residents feel their voices are not only heard, but also valued throughout the entire decision-making process.