

VOICES *Column*

Playing with democracy

**EVE EDMONDS***Editor*

EDITOR@RICHMOND-NEWS.COM

Call it a Catch 22.

City council postpones a decision on a new bylaw that would address concerns regarding mega home developments, pending more public input.

Meanwhile, the residents and homebuilders who had attended said meeting, hoping to offer public input, file out without having had the chance to voice their concerns because the bylaw has been postponed.

I get that process matters, and the process in this instance is that if a bylaw is sent back to staff, the issue is off council's agenda and it's on to the next item.

However, process can also be a way to, intentionally or otherwise, stifle debate and bury dissent. Not everyone would be willing to give up a Monday night to participate in the functioning of our democracy. It does not bode well for any of us if those willing to do so are sent home without an opportunity to speak or even witness councillors address the issue.

If there was one buzz word that made its way into every speech and press release during the last civic election, that word was "engagement." Candidates of all slates and stripes committed themselves to greater community engagement.

Of course, the irony here is that the bylaw is deferred due to a lack of public input. Never mind the fact offering public opinion regarding the bylaw is exactly what those folks were there to do; there has been a deluge of public input on this issue over the last few years, if not decades.

I could easily fill every page in this paper just with the mega home letters we've received to date.

And what about the formation of the Westwind Ratepayers' Association? Not to mention the fact the association managed to pack the Westwind elementary school gym with residents and developers all offering "public input" on this issue, albeit with no councillors present.

And then there's been the various petitions and protests at city hall.

I get that Coun. Linda McPhail's suggestion to defer speaks to the specifics of this particular bylaw, which, as it currently stands, may well need to be honed. However, it didn't escape anyone's notice that deferring the issue just at the start of summer, when council doesn't sit, has allowed for an even lengthier delay.

Now the plan is to host two "public education" meetings on July 8 for residents and July 9 for developers, although anyone can attend either. (See story page 8.)

Okay, let's try this again. I imagine many of the same folks will be there. But this game is getting wearing, and wearing people's patience with democratic engagement is a dangerous game indeed.