

Subject: Campaign rhetoric or false advertising: Let readers be the judge

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Dear Editor:

Whether by intent or due to unprofessional data analysis, the title of a recent advertisement by the North Shore Waterfront Industrial Association does a good job of misleading voters. *Why do North Vancouver taxpayers pay more than twice as much for municipal planning and development?* North Shore Outlook, P-4 October 27 2005. The statement is not true.

Deriving the information from an *independent* study that it commissioned from MKK Consulting Inc., the Association compounds the errors contained in the report, by publishing them in an address to candidates and voters.

Ignoring the fact that the report is riddled with caveats that data could not, or should not be compared due to wide variances in geographic area, demographics, services provided and accounting practices, the first major point to stress is that costs to District taxpayers are net, not gross.*

Furthermore, it makes little sense to compare the *combined per capita* costs of the City and District to those of Coquitlam, if one's only motive is to determine where in each community costs could be trimmed. In a professorial discussion of Mark Twain's famous line, it was said that, "Statistics can be misleading and sometimes deliberately distorting." The same might be said of financial statements and, in this instance, a graph displaying each of the communities separately would remove much of the 'smoke-blowing' drama of the ad, wouldn't it?

The MKK report states that taxpayers pay \$6.7 million for planning and development services. What it fails to say is that much of that is offset by \$3.7 million of non-tax revenues such as permits from developers etc. While some of the permit fees *are* paid by residents, the vast majority comes from developers. But regardless of who pays, the fees are not part of the tax levy.

Next, in addition to the variances admitted by MKK, but not included in their calculations, the consultants did not adjust for the functions performed by the Planning Department of the District but not by its counterpart in Coquitlam. Therefore, costs of the District's GIS, real estate and environmental services, should have been excluded from the matrix because, in Coquitlam, those functions are not housed in the planning department but are to be found elsewhere in the organizational budgets. Roughly speaking, that requires a \$1.2 million adjustment.

An apples to apples comparison of planning and development costs that actually go onto the tax bill is as follows:

- District of North Vancouver: \$1.8 million or \$22 per resident
- Coquitlam: \$2.2 million or \$19 a resident.

One does not argue that the costs of public services should receive regular review, and municipal "turf" should never be allowed to preclude the savings that might be achieved by joint delivery of services. Certainly there are questions to be answered, but the biased skew of the figures included, undercuts the credibility of the argument presented.

Had the NSWIA thought to ask, it would have discovered that fire services are already highly integrated across the North Shore. Attendance at last Monday's meeting of Council would have revealed that, for the past 9 months or so, tri-municipal senior staffs have been conducting an intensive, service-by-service review to determine where further cooperation and coordination would be of benefit. The report of that review is to be presented to the new councils shortly after they are sworn into office, along with recommendations for action.

In viewing the dollar signs wafting out of the ad's residential chimney, it cannot go without comment that two of the self-styled "13 leading corporate citizens" have benefitted mightily from the taxpayers' pockets. The first purchased for a pittance, three new ferries that cost \$456-million to build - for a loss of just under 1/2 a billion dollars to provincial taxpayers. And the second just won itself a \$1.2 million rebate on its tax assessment for the current and ensuing years. If the District appeal of that decision is not upheld, there is little doubt that the other 12 leading citizens will fight to be first up the courtroom steps with their own claims for tax rebates.

Another point that needs to be made is that, for two decades or longer, the overall *ratio* of business to residential property taxes has been approximately 30:70. That is not an unreasonable breakdown, surely - especially when one considers the amount of fees and charges being levied by regional agencies - over which neither taxpayers nor Council and Staff of the District and other municipalities have any meaningful control.

The last time this kind of thing happened, it was the shadowy Concerned Citizens' Association that published completely unfounded statements warning that high-rises were being planned for the Seymour Waterfront. Last time, it came at residents out of left field. And last time, it led to years of acrimonious assertions of bias back and forth across the council table.

This time, residents should be asking which candidates support - or are being supported by - the carefully worded, yet inflammatory NSWIA statements.

In my opinion, the claims advertised by the North Shore Waterfront Industrial Association are so inaccurate as to be rendered meaningless. As such, one would hope that 13 leading corporate citizens would be happy to publish a complete retraction, contained in an advertisement of equal size and prominence to that which offends voters' expectations of 'truth in [election] advertising'.

*Readers will note that the focus of this email letter is on relevance of the misleading advertisement to District taxpayers. That is because I am familiar with the issues in that community and far less so with administration of the City. I have no doubt that similar factual information can be obtained from Staff and Council of that community, should anyone care to ask.

Sincerely

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