

Strategic Sessions: What we heard from Members of Council

In July 2018, Intergovernmental & Corporate Strategy (ICS) invited Members of Council to meet to provide their thoughts and input into the future of Strategic Meetings of Council. Over the course of the summer and early fall, six Councillors met individually with ICS staff. While each Councillor may have emphasized different issues, their comments and concerns were remarkably similar and can be summarized as follows.

General support, but...

Without exception, Councillors saw value in setting aside time for Council to have strategic discussions. Among other things, when compared with Regular Meetings of Council, Strategic Meetings have the potential to provide:

- Scope for frank and open dialogue about medium- to long-term challenges facing The City
- Opportunities to build relationships and collegiality among Council colleagues
- More interactive, thoughtful, open-ended discussions, unconstrained by Administrative recommendations or the need to make final decisions

At the same time, however, the participating Councillors also indicated that recent meetings had failed to deliver on the promise of strategic conversations, or whether the current governance would allow for it going forward.

Concerns with the substance of Strategic Meetings

Councillors echoed concerns from Administration that many of the more recent Strategic Meeting agendas had become a “hodge-podge” of items, frequently lacking a common thread that would allow for a strategic conversation.

Many of the items that appear on Strategic Meeting agendas might be better dealt with at an Special Policy Committees (SPC) or a Regular Meeting of Council.

Too often, at strategic sessions, items are presented to Council by Administration as, essentially, for information or as a fait accompli, asking Council to sign-off on a recommendation or direction without seeking meaningful input.

Without prompting, several Councillors volunteered the Strategic Meetings on Cannabis, Wholly-Owned Subsidiaries, and the December 2017 session on Council Priorities as examples of agendas that worked.

(Related) Concerns with the process of Strategic Meetings

Agendas seem subject to change at a moment's notice. Councillors acknowledged that it is sometimes Council itself that is responsible for last minute changes, but more often it comes from Mayor's Office or Administration.

With short notice of agendas, or agenda comprised of disparate items, there is little opportunity for Councillors to familiarize or immerse themselves with the issue(s) prior to a meeting. On some occasions, briefing materials and reports are frequently provided last minute, or walked-into the meetings, providing no opportunity for proper review in advance.

There is no long-term vision or plan for the Strategic Meetings.

Council Chambers and even the Council Boardroom and other on site meetings spaces are not necessarily conducive to Strategic Discussions.

Proposals for change moving forward

Scheduling a session to plan strategic sessions for the year, combined with firmer control of the agenda, including possible changes to Procedure Bylaw if necessary.

Opportunities to hear from and engage with outside expertise, rather than simply relying on Administration.

Facilitated sessions to engage Council in exploration of the issues.

More off site meetings, including in different parts of The City (not all councillors agreed with this).

Ideas for Strategic Meeting agendas included:

- Relationship-building
- Municipal Development Plan Update
- Economic diversification and the Downtown
- Regional Planning
- Downloading of responsibilities
- Intergovernmental Affairs