

QUICK NOTES

The COSEMA Approach to Decision Making

The following outlines a series of six steps for sound municipal decision making. *The COSEMA Approach*, from which the model draws its life, is generations old. When applied to a municipal government setting, the principles will usually result in the evolution of a well thought out decision or policy that has benefitted from the collective input of councillors, staff and from the community at large.

Step One - Identify the Problem

The municipal council acts as a decision making body. Decisions made in this collective forum are intended to promote what is in the best interest of the municipal organization. Potential problems, concerns and new initiatives may be identified by individual councillors, staff members, interest groups or the general public. Identifying the problem and clarifying issues is a first step in the decision making process. The matter in question should be carefully examined and defined. This is not a time for closed minds! When examining issues brought before council or committees, there are a number of questions which should be considered.

- What is the problem or issue that needs to be addressed?
- Does council have the legal authority to deal with this matter?
- Has council dealt with this or a similar situation in the past? If so, how was it resolved?

Step Two - Identify Solutions

Once the matter has been identified and council has agreed to deal with it, serious consideration can be put into determining possible solutions. This first phase of solution identification may result from council's own discussion. Alternatively, it may be decided to refer the item to senior staff or to a committee for in-depth consideration and recommendation back to council. Public input may be sought at this time or later in the decision making process. Council is encouraged to avoid adopting what appears to be an easy solution. A sober, second thought with time in between is often useful. At this stage all possible solutions should be identified. Council can benefit from a process of creative thinking and brainstorming of ideas that will allow for development of possible solutions. Section 26 of the Municipalities Act of the Province of Prince Edward

- Has this matter been dealt with by other municipalities? If so, when, by which and what was the decision and its outcome?
- What solutions are appropriate for our municipality and when does the problem require resolution?
- What are the implications of deciding to adopt a particular solution - for example: financial, social, legal, economic, and human resource implications;

Step Three - Research and Report

It is at this stage that possible solutions are identified and implications associated with each solution considered. Further discussion by Council will now benefit from the preparation of a concise, well written background report. The intended audience should be kept in mind when preparing the report. Typeface; size of text; spacing; appropriate use of numbers, bullets and text to highlight important components, as well as other details of layout and content should be considered. The following may serve as a guide in the preparation of reports:

- a letter of transmittal;
- a title page that identifies the subject and nature of the report and includes the name(s) of the author(s) and their position(s);
- who the report is directed to and the date prepared;
- a table of contents;
- an executive summary if the report is over four pages in length;
- an introduction outlining the purpose of the report ;
- the methodology used to seek answers for the problem that was identified;
- a listing of possible solutions to resolve the problem as well as identification of the implications associated with each option;
- a recommendation as to what is considered to be the most appropriate solution the municipality;
- appendices and other information as may be considered appropriate.

If there is anything in the report which does not sound clear and reasonable to the author(s), it can be safely assumed it will not sound clear and reasonable to the reader or listener?

Step Four - Examine the Findings

It is now time for council to receive and consider the report. The entire document and particularly the section which sets out the different options, implications and recommendations should be carefully examined.

- Are there additional options?
- Does the recommended solution seem fair, effective and efficient?
- Have financial, legal, staffing and other implications associated with each option been identified and discussed?
- How will the recommended option impact upon the municipality's long-term objectives?
- Is further review of the matter required or can a decision be reached on the basis of what has been provided and discussed?

Step Five - Decide and Implement

At this step in the decision making process council is called upon to decide on an appropriate action. Once agreement has been reached by council, it becomes the responsibility of senior staff to ensure the intention of council as policy maker is implemented. The amount of staff time and expertise required to fulfill council's direction will depend on the complexity of the problem and of the solution.

Senior employees are responsible for implementing decisions of council and must carry out all legitimate decisions, regardless of personal views. Naturally, a staff member must never be asked to do anything which is illegal or unethical.

- Do I fully understand the intent of council's decision?
- Who should be made aware of council's decision - employees, committees, citizens groups, general public, media, others?
- What procedures should be developed to guide the implementation of this decision and who should do what?
- What resources are required - human, financial, physical, and technological?
- What steps are involved in obtaining these resources?

Step Six - Follow Up Evaluation

There is a need for council to be assured its decisions are being implemented as intended and that any approved decision remains relevant as a result of changes which may occur in the municipal environment. It can be expected that senior staff will periodically report to council any problems which arise or that are foreseen as a result of a particular decision. Councillors should feel comfortable requesting progress reports on any action they may have approved. The effect of the decision as it is being implemented should be compared with the original intent.

- What has been the reaction to council's decision?
- Is the original decision still valid given the current operational environment?
- Are there any circumstances that suggest reconsideration of the decision is appropriate?

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