

Departmental Optimization Final Report

District of North Saanich – Planning and Community Services Department

On September 19, 2025, Poole Consulting Ltd. was retained by the District of North Saanich to conduct a departmental optimization review on the Planning and Community Services Department. The purpose of this review is to identify opportunities to improve how the department operates, strengthen team collaboration and comradery, and ensure that organizational processes are efficient and aligned with best practices.

Specifically, the District is seeking a review process that includes:

- An initial scan of current departmental operations, structure, and practices.
- Engagement with staff to understand challenges, strengths, and opportunities for improvement.
- Recommendations focused on both operational effectiveness and workplace culture.
- A final report delivered to the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), summarizing findings and outlining actionable steps for improvement.

OBJECTIVES & APPROACH

The review included an examination and assessment of the overall leadership, management and operation of the Planning and Community Services department considering existing and future challenges. Comparisons were made to local government best practices along with the current state of the department.

This review is intended to provide a broad overview of existing conditions along with recommendations for improvement. This information should assist the organization and Council to make decisions on the future governance and operations of the department and organization. The review also provides findings and recommendations on key operational elements as identified through the process.

METHODOLOGY

Poole Consulting Ltd. utilized the following methodology:

1. **Research** – review and understand specific information relevant to the operation of the Planning and Community Services department – e.g. organizational structure, job descriptions, policies, procedures, bylaws, etc.

2. **Review Current Structure** – Understand current management and staff job portfolios with a view to potentially make modifications that are consistent with any organizational changes recommended.
3. **Engage & Consult** – Engage, listen, consult and document stakeholder input to ensure a broad perspective is considered. Conduct confidential interviews with the CAO and all 13 Managers and staff in the Planning and Community Services Department.
4. **Develop Options** – Utilizing industry best practices, develop potential reorganization options that:
 - align services
 - provide appropriate leadership control
 - encourage the marketability for attraction and retention of staff
5. **Confirm Options** – Review findings and options with the CAO considered for proposed changes to the department and improved overall function of the organization. Adjust as required.
6. **Final Report**

FEEDBACK /INTERVIEWS

Staff were open and honest during the interviews, and they sincerely desire to improve the workplace and levels of service provided to the public. Managers and staff were aware of the reason this review was conducted and are hopeful that there will be improvements following its completion. Most reviews only interview a sample representation of the organization/department, depending on the size of local government. In the District's case, the consultant was asked to interview all managers and staff to obtain full feedback from every member of the department. Most concerns (addressed in the recommendations) were repeated in the majority of interviews, confirming the relevancy and accuracy of the information.

Employee Engagement

Overall, staff morale and employee engagement are low in the department. Employees are committed to the community and each other but are disconnected with the leadership. Staff work well with each other, managing by assisting each other in the absence of direction. Morale is challenged in areas where work levels have increased dramatically, s. 22(1) Work is reactionarily driven, not strategically. The importance of day-to-day work is often usurped

by emerging issues that are driven top down with no clear reason why. Collaboration and workload consideration from those performing the work is not nurtured.

With the high turnover in senior leadership, staff have been exposed to good and bad leadership. This frequent change has created havoc in the organization. Rebuilding trust in the organization is the biggest challenge the CAO must address.

Organizational Culture

Culture in the planning department is suffering. Many noted that morale has declined over the last year. When asked how they would rate the level of morale on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), most rated it 5 or less. Many noted that the joy that had when they started the job, to where it is now, has drastically reduced. Some even said they had checked out. These are the ones the organization risks losing if conditions continue.

Communication

This was identified by almost everyone as the number one issue. Staff are uninformed as to what is happening in the department. Employees find out when something happens

s. 22(1)

s. 22(1) Email requests that were sent to s. 22(1) and are already late in being responded to sit until s. 22(1) returns. There is little to no recognition of the importance and priority of staff work. Everyone noted that responses to verbal requests and emails go unanswered. Many just push through by trying to receive direction from the s. 22(1) or others s. 22(1)

Job onboarding is also in need of repair. New employees noted that their orientation lacked introductions to department and District staff, no established workstation, HR forms that require completion but are not reviewed with the new employee, etc.

Job Descriptions

Job descriptions do not reflect the current structure of the department. Most of the employees are confused as to who their supervisor is. The current s. 22(1) job description identifies s. 22(1) employees reporting to s. 22(1) and the prime reason the job has been categorized as exempt, is that it "manages people". The job the individual applied for and was awarded, is not the job s. 22(1) is currently filling today.

This lack of clarity creates angst among the employees and forces them to seek direction elsewhere. With the current tension between s. 22(1) in the planning division, some employees seek advice from s. 22(1)

Attendance Management

There is no formal attendance management program. Employees are expected to document their own time and a "trust system" is how time away from the office is currently given. This works if all employees properly document extra time worked and when time is taken off to account for this accumulation of banked overtime.

However, where documentation is lacking, accountability wains. This is especially important at the senior exempt levels. s. 22(1) is often away from the office with no notification of where s. 22(1) is at or going. Flex days, not only for s. 22(1) but for some staff as well, seem to "awarded" in greater numbers than what is perceived to be owed. There are times when s. 22(1) does not come in and sends an email after the start of the day, notifying staff that s. 22(1) will not be in. This creates a culture of unreliability. Staff now manage on their own since consistency, direction and reliability s. 22(1) is diminished.

Employee Attraction and Retention

A quick scan on the CivicInfo job postings site, shows that there are currently 20 planning positions being advertised, the majority in the lower mainland and on Vancouver Island. Although the Building Inspection and Bylaw Compliance division is extremely stable (most employees of have been there 5+ years), the Planning Division suffers from high turnover. North Saanich is challenged in terms of recruitment in the region at this time. Factors that affect this include pay and attractiveness of the organization as a workplace. When employees no longer enjoy their work, they become the biggest advertisers to the sector. In its current state most employees would not recommend the North Saanich Planning Department as a good place to work.

Performance Development

Staff report that they have had few to no performance reviews over their time with the District. Employees pass probation according to the passing of time rather than a proper 3 and 6 month review and final recommendation to retain permanently or terminate employment. The high importance of the probationary period is to evaluate the work and

fit of a new employee after the interview and hiring stage. Underestimating the importance of this period puts the organization at risk should poor performance not be identified and addressed during the time it is best corrected. Performance management is a vital component of a well run organization, allowing employees to both understand their strengths and weaknesses and perhaps most importantly, seek direction to better their careers. This also supports a well structured succession plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No organization is perfect and there are always opportunities to consider improvements. The following recommendations should be considered as important to the District of North Saanich:

1. Human Resources

Review and revise job descriptions – Some job descriptions did not match the duties or responsibilities that the employee had or was performing. Most notable was the Manager of Planning. This position should be supervising yet does not. One position that works under the Manager of Planning notes that their position reports to the Manager. However, others that are under the direction of the Manager still state that they report to the Director. In comparison, the Building Inspection and Bylaw Compliance division operates smoothly and is properly structured.

There is also confusion as to why the Manager of Planning was created.

There was no long term foresight into this position.

To ensure all duties are correct, a proper review needs to be done to ensure alignment throughout the department. The Director is in charge of structuring the department as he/she knows what the department needs to function properly. This is done in conjunction with the CAO.

- a. Establish a proper Organizational Structure** – The planning division should be structured the same way as the building inspection and bylaw compliance division. It provides clarity and shares the division's responsibilities for supervision. However, a two-phased approach is likely required in the initial stage. The first stage would be to have the 2 Senior Planners and the Manager of Planning report to the Director. All other positions (as currently identified in the Manager of Planning job description) can report to the Manager of Planning. I would also suggest that instead of both Administrative Assistants reporting to the Manager of Planning, one should report to the Manager of Building Inspections and Bylaw Compliance. Cross

training can be done between the two positions to cover each other off during illness or vacation.

In the long term, the final stage would be to have all planning staff report to the Manager, similar to the building and bylaw compliance division. This can be further developed by the CAO.

The bottom line is that every employee in the planning division should not be reporting directly to the Director (see attached Organization Chart). s. 22(1)

s. 22(1)

- b. **Establish a New Employee Orientation Policy** – New employees felt that the planning orientation they received could vastly be improved. There is no process that s. 22(1) does to welcome the new employee to the organization. As the saying goes, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression". s. 22(1) should ensure that a proper orientation process is a priority.
- c. **Establish a Performance Review Policy** – Another area requiring improvement is the assurance that performance reviews are being properly conducted. Directors and managers need to understand the importance of this duty. Conducting a performance review on an employee makes sure that performance issues that are small do not grow into something larger and unmanageable. As an example, the 6 month review on s. 22(1) was done my email and not face-to face. These reviews are being requested by HR but are not being followed up on and subsequently the due dates pass. In some cases, probationary staff complete their 6 month probationary period by the passing of time and not by a filed review along with a confirmation letter from the supervisor. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that regular documented feedback is provided.

2. Amend the Appointment of Officers Bylaw

- a. An interesting comment made s. 22(1) was that the Director has an advantage over the CAO since the position is listed in the Officers Bylaw. This interpretation loosely means that the CAO does not have full authority over the management of the position. This is never a good position to put the CAO in. After reviewing the Appointment of Officers Bylaw for the District not only is this position included but all Directors along with one Manager.

The majority of Officers Bylaws in the province are restricted to the positions of CAO, Corporate Officer and Financial Officer. The latter two because they are statutory and required by legislation. Other than that, no

other position should be included. Why? Because it takes the legs out from under Council's one employee to properly manage the workforce. Loosely it means that all a supervisor needs is 3 friends on council and performance doesn't matter. Including more positions than legislatively required puts council right in the fray of administration. It also places the risk and responsibility back on the elected council. Elected officials are elected to govern, not administer and supervise staff. This is what you hire a CAO to do.

3. Address the lack of leadership

- a.** With 40 years of local government experience, I have seen hundreds of good and poor managers. Those who were most successful value and possess the traits of a good leader. Respect, accountability, good communicator, vision, integrity are but a few.

s. 22(1)

Respect and accountability were absent s. 22(1). This absence created a vacuum of no direction. Communication was largely ignored as emails and follow-up to staff requests were not addressed. s. 22(1)

The morale in the department is at a low level. Some staff are "checked out" and are considering moving on. The cost to replace staff, again, is costly monetarily and productively to the organization.

Tone is set by a good leader who embraces and lives values that make him or her seen as supporting and believing in those they supervise.

The organization needs to address this issue in order to improve the department and begin the process of rebuilding.