



# The Corporation of the District of Central Saanich

## REGULAR COUNCIL REPORT

For the Regular Council meeting on Monday, July 14, 2025

Re: Elector Process - Redevelopment

---

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. *Reaffirm support for the current process for the Civic Redevelopment Project, as originally established and consistently followed to date, and,*
2. *Direct staff to bring forward the “What We Heard” report from the current phase of engagement as soon as possible to inform Council’s selection of a preferred option for the renewal or redevelopment of the Civic Redevelopment Project.*

### **PURPOSE:**

To report to Council on the details of a non-statutory, voluntary and non-binding elector process, now that the Province of BC does not require a formal electoral approval process for the borrowing on the Civic Redevelopment Project (Municipal Hall, Police and Fire Hall 2).

### **BACKGROUND:**

On June 23, 2025, Council gave three readings to the Loan Authorization Bylaw No. 2240 for the Civic Redevelopment Project (Redevelopment Project) and referred the bylaw to the Inspector of Municipalities for approval. An additional motion was made, directing: *That staff report, either in September or earlier, on what referendum or additional non-binding engagement process could be done for the redevelopment project, and potentially other topics that could be included.*

The Redevelopment Project has been in the public realm for many years. Council first considered the project in 2006 as the building was not only meeting legislated seismic requirements for protective services but also nearing the end of its useful life. In 2014, with the development of Fire Hall 1, Council deferred it for 10 years.

Building on a long-standing need, the Redevelopment Project has been informed by the intersection of technical assessment, long-term financial planning, and Council-adopted policies developed through meaningful public engagement.

- The Saanichton Village Design Plan (2020) identified 1903 Mt Newton Cross Road as a Special Plan Area, supporting a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use village core. That vision was shaped with input from over 935 participants, including 140 individuals who provided in-depth feedback that helped define community priorities.
- These themes were further reinforced through the development of the Official Community Plan (2023)—the District’s guiding land use and growth policy—created through a multi-year process

that reached over 26,000 residents and interest holders, with more than 4,000 actively engaged through surveys, events, and discussion forums.

- Principles from the OCP were used as part of the evaluation criteria for the redevelopment, helping ensure alignment with broader community objectives.
- At the same time, the District's Asset Management Plan, launched in 2017 and updated in 2022, confirmed the condition and lifecycle challenges of the Municipal Hall, Fire Station 2, and Police Station, estimating a replacement cost of \$42 million over five years (2022–2027). The Asset Management Plan is reviewed annually through the budget process.
- Every four years, Council established a policy to have a [statistically significant survey](#) to affirm community priorities prior to their Strategic Planning process..
- The project was then included in the District's Strategic Plans (2021–2026) and advanced through the 2024–2027 Strategic Implementation Plan.

As a result, the proposals before Council reflect a measured, best-practice approach—grounded in technical due diligence, long-range financial and asset planning, adopted land use policy, and broad community input gathered over several years.

Throughout the redevelopment process, Council endorsed three phases of the *Communications & Engagement Plan for Civic Redevelopment* (Communications Plan). This current phase of engagement is intended to affirm that the District is on the right track, providing the community with an opportunity to confirm priorities, weigh options, and help shape the final direction before key decisions are made.

#### Recent Amendments to British Columbia's Municipal Liabilities Regulation

The Communications Plan consistently communicated that “the District may require elector approval” if the District needed to go over the approval-free borrowing threshold for municipalities of 5% of its annual revenue as per the British Columbia's Municipal Liabilities Regulation (Liabilities Regulation).

In June 2025, the Province [made amendments to the Liabilities Regulation](#) that increased the approval-free borrowing threshold for municipalities from 5% to 10% of their annual revenue, allowing them to take on more debt without requiring elector approval. This change aims to reduce delays and administrative burdens for essential infrastructure projects, especially in fast-growing communities. For Central Saanich, it means the Municipal Facility Redevelopment Project can proceed without elector approval, as its projected debt falls within the new limit.

With these changes, Council requested that staff report back on what referendum or additional non-binding engagement process could be done for the redevelopment project, and potentially other topics that could be included.

#### Referendum vs. Plebiscite

Given that there is no required elector approval on the borrowing for the Redevelopment Project, this report will use the term ‘plebiscite’ from here on to avoid confusion with the required legislated processes. A ‘referendum’ is generally used for decisions where local governments are required to obtain elector approval, including borrowing authorization bylaws and boundary extensions. It may also sometimes be used for an opinion poll in conjunction with a local general election (see Appendix A). Referendums and alternative approval processes follow very prescriptive, legislated processes that incur additional costs yet give certainty in the validity of the process.

**DISCUSSION:**

When making significant government decisions, it is essential to weigh multiple factors should be evaluated through a structured and evidence-informed approach:

- technical analysis,
- legislative,
- policy alignment,
- financial implications, and
- community input.

While all components are important, their relative weight should be proportionate to the level of risk, cost, and long-term impact of the decision. High-value capital projects or decisions such as the Redevelopment Project, with legal and regulatory consequences often place greater emphasis on technical due diligence, financial sustainability, and statutory compliance.

Community input remains a critical component, particularly in shaping values-based outcomes and ensuring decisions reflect public priorities. Balancing these elements requires transparent trade-offs, where Council can understand and evaluate where expert recommendations, financial feasibility, and community preferences align or diverge. This integrated approach supports good governance, mitigates risk, and ensures decisions are durable, defensible, and responsive to the public interest.

**Communications Plan**

Since October 2023, the District has undertaken a phased public engagement process to support the Redevelopment Project. This initiative aims to replace aging municipal facilities and optimize land use at 1903 Mt Newton Cross Road and the adjacent Hovey Road property. The *Communications Plan* was developed to ensure transparency, foster public input, and build support on the concepts.

**Phase 1** (October 2023) introduced the community to the opportunity to redevelop the Mt Newton site, with a focus on aligning redevelopment with long-term community priorities. Engagement activities included public open houses, surveys, and informal events such as “Coffee with Council.” Feedback from this phase indicated strong public interest in modern, functional buildings that support a range of community activities. Residents also expressed the need for more detailed information about the project’s scope and rationale. 300 residents shared feedback and ideas via 4 Open Houses, 1 (statistically significant) phone survey of 100 residents, a business survey, correspondence, and information kiosks

**Phase 2** (July to October 2024) built upon the Phase 1 input by seeking more specific feedback on the amenities, services, and design features desired for the Mt Newton. Residents emphasized the importance of community-serving spaces, environmental sustainability, financial transparency, and accessible design. The “What We Heard – Phase 2” report, published in October 2024, confirmed that residents valued continued engagement and expected clarity on costs and long-term value for taxpayers. 1903 Design Principles included 291 survey responses and many conversations via an Open House.

**Phase 3**, launched in June 2025, marks the first opportunity for the public to review civic building concepts and associated financial models. Through a combination of in-person and virtual open houses, as well as pop-up events across the community, residents are being asked to provide input on the proposed options for a new municipal hall and yard facility. This feedback will inform the development of a final project plan, anticipated for Council consideration in the fall.

To date, there are over 130 responses to the current online survey for the Redevelopment Project for Phase 3 of the Engagement. This survey will remain open into August and residents have been invited to participate via mailed postcards to ~9,500 homes. In addition to four open houses with over 250 attendees in June, staff continue to gather feedback from pop-ups at community events over the summer.

The What We Heard report this fall will give Council a clear summary of support for the Redevelopment Project's three design concepts.

Each phase of engagement has played a critical role in shaping the project's direction, with resident feedback directly influencing the site concept, design preferences, and financial strategy. The District's goal has been to ground the decision-making in transparency, responsiveness, and long-term planning, with the goal of ensuring that civic facilities are designed to meet the needs of the community today and into the future.

#### Review of Plebiscite and Additional Non-binding Engagement Process Options

To support Council's decision-making, three additional methods for gathering resident feedback may be considered: a plebiscite, a statistically weighted online survey, and a representative sample phone survey. Each offers distinct benefits and trade-offs in terms of cost, timeline, demographic reach, and statistical reliability, as outlined in Appendix C.

- **Plebiscite:** A non-binding vote open to all electors, this option provides broad but less predictable input, costs around \$80,000, and adds about three months to the timeline. Responses often skew toward more engaged or older residents.
- **Statistically Weighted Online Survey:** Costs about \$26,000 and takes two months, this option adjusts for age, gender, and region to better reflect the population, but may still carry self-selection bias and overlap with existing efforts.
- **Representative Sample Phone Survey:** The fastest option at six weeks and \$16,000–\$19,000, this option ensures demographic balance and can reach underrepresented groups, though it typically yields fewer responses and may face non-response bias.

While not required to meet engagement goals, these tools could be used to validate existing engagement findings, test preferences, or respond to public demand for a vote.

Staff recommend continuing with the current *Communications and Engagement Plan*, which is thorough, aligned with District practices, and already underway. If broader input is desired, a phone survey could be added with minimal schedule impact.

#### **IMPLICATIONS:**

##### Jurisdictional Comparisons

There are few, if any, examples of non-binding referendums done outside of a general local election process. Appendix A highlights some recent examples of elector approval processes, though there is no registry on electoral processes as no Provincial oversight is done. The processes are almost exclusively required for borrowing.

Following a prescribed process, such as elector approval (which, even in the case of non-binding referendums, would be followed) increases the risk of error, misinformation and challenges to decisions. As an example, the City of Nanaimo has had to repeat an AAP process multiple times due to errors and perceived errors in the process. Another local government was also recently challenged in Court by the public related to the AAP process, focused largely on the amount of time it was open for.

In addition, a quick investigation of the regulations in other provinces reveals a different model, with up to 25% borrowing prior to elector approval and differing levels of Provincial oversight and approval.

### **Communication**

#### **Consistent Messaging**

The *Communications Plan* has consistently communicated that “the District may require elector approval” if the District needed to go over the approval-free borrowing threshold for municipalities of 5% of its annual revenue as per the British Columbia’s Municipal Liabilities Regulation (Liabilities Regulation). The District has not advised the public that a non-binding plebiscite would be held if elector approval was not required based on debt levels.

#### **Equitability of Engagement**

Holding a non-binding plebiscite may appear responsive to community concerns, but its voluntary nature, cost, and potential delays—no longer required by legislation—could be seen as catering to a small, vocal group. This approach may unintentionally exclude quieter voices, including those who have already participated through other engagement processes. As the outcome is non-binding, it could also create confusion about its role in decision-making and set expectations for similar processes in future applications. Public engagement is intended to inform policy; applying that policy is Council’s responsibility. Delaying a decision may increase the cost of future municipal facility construction.

#### **Future Opportunities for Feedback**

If a decision is for the Redevelopment Project is made, the District will hold itself to the same standard as other proposed developments.

For example, if the chosen concept project requires an amendment to the Official Community Plan (OCP) Bylaw, there will be a Public Hearing. This process will provide community members ongoing opportunity to provide their feedback to Council.

### **Legislative/Policy**

The June 2025 amendments to British Columbia’s Municipal Liabilities Regulation increased the approval-free borrowing threshold for municipalities from 5% to 10% of their annual revenue, allowing them to take on more debt without requiring elector approval. This change aims to reduce delays and administrative burdens for essential infrastructure projects, especially in fast-growing communities. For Central Saanich, it means the Municipal Facility Redevelopment Project can proceed without a referendum or Alternate Approval Process, as its projected debt falls within the new limit.

A quick investigation of the regulations in other provinces reveals a different model, with up to 25% borrowing prior to elector approval and differing levels of Provincial oversight and approval.

**Financial/ Resource****Table 1. Considerations for a Voluntary Plebiscite (Non-Binding Referendum)**

Category	Cost Estimates	Notes
Plebiscite Expenses	\$80,000	based on 2022 election costs
Cost escalation due to project delays	\$550,000	increase in construction costs due to inflation (see Appendix B for Schedule delays) Note: Does not include potential financial impacts from delayed land sales or shifts in land value
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$630,000</b>	

**First Nations**

Council has previously directed the direct engagement of both Tsartlip and Tsawout First Nations, to inform them of the project and seek their feedback as residents and neighbours. At this time, staff have reach out and are including attendance at the upcoming WĒTANMY Powwow later in July, as possibly at future Band Council meetings.

**Legal/HR**

There is no legislative requirements for an elector process with the recent change of the regulation for municipal borrowing. A voluntary plebiscite would follow the same process and oversight of a local municipal election.

**Communications**

Throughout the redevelopment process, the District has clearly outlined that the District *may* require elector approval as required for borrowing purposes, not the efficacy of the Redevelopment project. Having a plebiscite would be inconsistent with the District's communications to the public thus far. Throughout the three phases of engagement, there has not been significant feedback on the elector approval process or requirement for a referendum or plebiscite.

**Official Community Plan**

While the specific renewal of the Municipal Hall, Fire Station, and Police facility is not explicitly identified in the Official Community Plan (2023), Concepts A and B strongly align with OCP principles and land use objectives. The OCP emphasizes the creation of complete, walkable communities, the efficient use of public lands and infrastructure, and the enhancement of village centres—particularly Saanichton Village. The Redevelopment Project advances these objectives by supporting the transformation of a key site into a mixed-use, community-serving hub that contributes to local vibrancy, accessibility, and long-term service delivery. By aligning the project with the policy direction and guiding principles established through extensive public engagement, the District is positioned to meet future needs in a manner that is fiscally responsible, environmentally sustainable, and consistent with the community's long-term vision.

**OPTIONS:****Option 1 (recommended):**

Reaffirm support for the current process for the Civic Redevelopment Project, as originally established and consistently followed to date, and,

Direct staff to bring forward the “What We Heard” report from the current phase of engagement as soon as possible to inform Council’s selection of a preferred option for the renewal or redevelopment of the Civic Redevelopment Project.

**Option 2:**

1. That Council seek community input on the three redevelopment project options through a representative sample phone survey to be completed by the end of September, to assist in the determination of the preferred concept to advance for the Redevelopment Project (Municipal Hall, Police & Fire Hall 2).
2. That the results of the current engagement and the phone survey be brought forward to Council in Fall 2025 to inform the selection of the preferred option.

**Option 3:**

1. Direct staff to undertake a non-binding plebiscite process to seek input on the public’s preferred concept to advance for the Redevelopment Project (Municipal Hall, Police & Fire Hall 2), to be completed prior to the end of 2025.
2. That the question for the plebiscite be as follows:
  - a. Which of the following options is your preference?
    - i. Option A: Hovey Road (with recreation potential)
    - ii. Option B: Mt. Newton Cross Road
    - iii. Option C: Mt. Newton Renovation/Expansion
3. That the following be appointed for the process:
  - a. Emilie Gorman, Chief Election Officer
  - b. Pamela Martin, Deputy Chief Election Officer
4. That given the non-binding nature of the plebiscite, efficiencies of cost be determined in the electoral process.

**CONCLUSION:**

Given the scale and significance of the Redevelopment Project, it is essential that Council’s decision-making be grounded in established best practices—namely, the integration of Council-adopted policy, technical and asset condition evidence, long-term financial planning, and meaningful community input. The District’s existing communications and engagement plan for Phase 3 was developed with these principles in mind and is already being implemented to reach a broad and diverse cross-section of residents.

While additional engagement methods such as a plebiscite or specialized surveys may offer some incremental value, they also introduce considerable cost, delay, and potential confusion at a critical stage of the project. Maintaining the current approach ensures continuity, upholds the integrity of the planning process to date, and reflects a balanced, thoughtful strategy that is aligned with the District’s values, responsibilities, and long-term community vision. However, if Council wishes to get a broader input, a representative sample phone survey could be implemented with minor adjustments to the project schedule.

Respectfully written and submitted by:	Emilie Gorman, Director of Corporate Services and Corporate Officer
Concurrence by:	Christine Culham, Chief Administrative Officer

**ATTACHMENTS:**

Appendix A: Previous Elector Approval Processes – BC

Appendix B: Detailed Timeline

Appendix C: Review of Plebiscite and Additional Non-Binding Engagement Process Options



**Appendix A: Previous Elector Approval Processes - BC**

<b>Municipality and Project</b>	<b>AAP or Referendum?</b>	<b>Required?</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Victoria Crystal Pool Project (2025)	Referendum	Yes (borrowing); Options also included	Passed
Okanagan Falls Incorporation (2025)	Referendum	Yes	Passed
Public Works Yard – Saanich (2025)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	TBD
Ravensong Recreation Center – RDN (2025)	Referendum	Yes (borrowing)	Failed
Municipal Hall – Ladysmith (2024)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	Failed
Public Works Yard – Nanaimo (2024)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	Failed
Water Reservoirs Nanoose Bay – RDN (2024)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	Failed
Aquatic Center – Prince George (2024)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	Passed
Recreation Program – Kelowna (2023)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	Passed
Cultural Center – Vernon (2022)	AAP	Yes (borrowing)	Passed
Victoria-Saanich Amalgamation Study <sup>1</sup> (2018)	Referendum (yes/no)	No (non-binding)	Passed
Salt Spring Island Incorporation (2017)	Referendum	Yes	Failed
Transportation and Transit – Metro Van (2015)	Plebiscite	Yes (taxation) *Run by <a href="#">Elections BC</a>	Failed

Referendum results held alongside 2022 local general election: [CivicInfo - 2022 Referendum Results](#)

---

<sup>1</sup> “Are you in favour of spending up to \$250,000 for establishing a Citizen's Assembly to explore the costs, benefits and disadvantages of the amalgamation between the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria?”