

ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTLOOK

LAKE LOUISE BANFF CANMORE MD OF BIGHORN KANANASKIS STONEY NAKODA

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THUNDERSTRUCK

Lightning shoots down from the sky as a thunderstorm rolls through the Bow Valley on Monday (Aug. 7).

MATTHEW THOMPSON RMO PHOTO

Canmore Utility Master Plan should be council approved: governance experts

GREG COLGAN

CANMORE – A key guiding master plan for the Town of Canmore should be approved by council, say multiple political and governance experts.

The Utility Master Plan – an important guiding document that outlines future water and wastewater infrastructure costs – was presented to council at its May committee of the whole meeting.

Though forecasting upwards of \$200 million in potential infrastructure needs in the next 25 years as well as being instrumental in setting new off-site levies, it is unknown when or if the guiding document will return for council approval.

“Large budgetary decisions do need to come before council, including the basis upon which those budgetary proposals rest. ... The reality is each of those councillors has a fiduciary responsibility where they’re dealing with significant tax expenditure of taxpayer dollars,” said Lori Williams, a political scientist at Mount Royal University. “They have a responsibility to ensure those

expenditures are prudent and that requires information.

“It requires consultation and debate within council because they are ultimately the ones who will be held responsible at the ballot box and legally for the decisions that are made. It’s a position of stewardship of trust with respect to those tax dollars and they have a responsibility to ensure the decisions that are being made and the basis of those decisions are scrutinized and approved by council.”

George Cuff, a municipal governance expert with more than four decades of experience in municipal leadership, consulting and writing, echoed Williams’ comments and emphasized the need for councils to approve all guiding documents.

He noted a key aspect of a council’s role is to provide guidance and direction on bylaws, policies, master plans and budgets. And while they may not have specific expertise, the expectation is they act as generalists and make decisions for residents and the community.

“Management’s job is to advise. Council’s job is to provide direction to bylaws, policies and resolutions,”

said Cuff, who had the lead role on behalf of the province in the inspection of the City of Chestermere and has written more than 10 books on municipal governance.

“It’s fundamental to the residents of Canmore. A master plan needs to be presented by administration or the CAO on the basis of ‘here’s the key policies that we recommend council approve’. Once approved, [municipal staff would] be in a position to look at the actual details and see whether or not they fit the policies.”

Joe Lyons, the director of Western University’s local government program, emphasized the importance of council giving direction when it comes to high level guiding documents.

“It’s the role of council to approve high level strategic documents that set the shape of the municipality,” he said. “For something that has a 25-year planning horizon, a lot of the development would be done by staff and there’d be community engagement, but council would be the ultimate decision-maker on the plan.”

GOVERNANCE

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MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Eila Kresowaty McCluskey, 3, looks in the mirror to see the final product of her face painting at the Canmore Folk Music Festival in Centennial Park on Sunday (Aug. 6).

MATTHEW THOMPSON RMO PHOTO

Passing master plans part of governance, 'democratic accountability'

GOVERNANCE

CONTINUED FROM A1

"The way the system is supposed to work is staff advises, council decides and staff implements. We're missing that council decision part in the process. Staff bring technical expertise and professional advice, council plays an important role in this and that's the job of a council to be responsive to their constituents. ... They're kind of negating that role by not approving a big plan."

Without council giving its approval, Lyons said it lacks the democratic accountability residents should expect from elected officials.

"There are technical aspects to these decisions, but ultimately they have political ramifications," he said.

"It's not something that should entirely be left to staff to determine because there's no democratic accountability there. If the public is upset about a part of the Utility Master Plan, what's their recourse? If they go to council, council can say we didn't make a decision on it. Where does that leave the citizen?"

The 2010 and 2016 UMPs were each approved by council. The 2022 version was presented at the May committee of the whole meeting, but there was no plan to return for council approval.

Despite not receiving council ascent, the UMP was used to justify an added \$150,000 expense for waterline replacement for approval of the Railway Avenue central project on July 4 and is expected to begin next year.

The lone dissenting vote, Coun. Tanya Foubert, noted she supported the project but was unable to support the \$150,000 ask for a waterline replacement since the UMP has yet to be passed by council.

"I find myself in a bit of a pickle because I'm not opposed to this project, but I have concerns around the process on how this motion is in front of us," she said. "I think the Utility Master Plan should be approved by council before it's used to make budget decisions."

The remark drew visible frustration from the leader-

ship table of Canmore's senior staff who were at the meeting.

Canmore council's procedural bylaw outlines three specific actions needed by council when considering or accepting a document. All three require a motion to either approve to direct Town staff to implement any actions that refer to the document, accept it as information or accept it for planning purposes.

"If you have a Utility Master Plan and it's only been provided as information or presented, the answer is it wasn't approved," Cuff said. "There's no sense going further than that since it's not approved. Don't bring forward any projects that are within the master plan because it's not approved."

Lars Hallstrom, a political scientist at the University of Lethbridge and director of the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy, said when it comes to highly technical documents there may be some leeway, especially in an engineering document such as the Utility Master Plan.

"They may be in the general sense where the buck stops in terms of municipal decision-making with the mayor and council, but ultimately they are also part of a broader system. ... The language in board governance is noses in, thumbs out," said Hallstrom, who previously published a case study on Canmore in the 2021 State of Rural Canada report. "They're paying attention, but you don't mess with it."

"In other cases, they may need to be a little bit more thumbs in, but I think with the Utility Master Plan and where it sits as an overarching plan that's future looking, it is something from my position as a policy scholar it's a good sign that councils are saying we need to know what's happening and we need to understand some of the broader reasons why, but to not second guess."

GOVERNANCE

CONTINUED ON A5

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GOVERNANCE

CON'T FROM A4

He noted if there's little change between the updated guiding document and the previous one, it could change expectations. However, councils ultimately make decisions after receiving as much information as possible.

"We do want expertise on top, but typically in the democratic policy context councils are making decisions with advice and input from multiple sources, including their [municipal staff]."

Calgary-based consulting firm Municipal Experts CEO Paul Salvatore, who worked in Alberta municipal governments for several years and has more than 25 years of governance experience, said if the update doesn't bring significant changes or cost implications compared to the previous version it doesn't necessarily need council approval if the information has been presented.

He added the master plan would have been earmarked in a previous budget to be completed, further giving council notice of it being completed by Town staff.

"It really comes down to how mayor and council want to go through that and if they've made previous decisions that impact that adoption. ... Unless there's some dramatic changes in cost and scope that are identified in the Utility Master Plan that were not previously discussed, then it could simply be a scenario where it's a vote taking place just on the basis of a symbolic vote to say they've seen it and approve it.

"At the end of the day, you've got an elected mayor and council that are entrusted with these decisions. ... They're there for good reasons and are intended to represent the people that elected them."

Salvatore said for some councils, they may choose to approve it even if there are only minor changes from the previous master plan. However, if costs and scopes for projects have changed, it's more likely to return to council for a vote.

"If any major projects and costs have greatly changed, it's generally safer for mayor and council to have a vote on it because there's significant changes from what they originally saw," he said. "If there are first, second or third readings to it, then oftentimes there's time to contemplate revisions beyond that."

The largest new expense in the 2022 Utility Master Plan was an estimated \$75 million to \$125 million project to update Canmore's wastewater treatment plant to meet provincial guidelines by 2032. The master plan also added several waterline replacements to the tune of about \$32.75 million that weren't in the 2016 version.

Canmore Mayor Sean Krausert said the master plan is a highly technical document used for planning purposes, but the projects mentioned are not set in stone.

He added council had opportunity in May to ask questions of both staff and the consultant CIMA+, but having the master plan potentially return to council could take place.

"Going forward, I think it would be better to go through a formal endorsement. ... I think it provides a formality to it, but still recognizing that we're not the experts who put it together but it marks it as coming to council and puts council's support in a more formal way," he said.

Krausert said he'll be raising the issue

at the September CAO-council meeting, where council members and CAO discuss topics that may need council attention.

He added the master plan isn't necessary for council approval through the Municipal Government Act. However, with the master plan being used for off-site levy negotiations and dealing with financials, the off-site levy would need to be finalized by council, he said.

"Plans for planning purposes are often received by council. It doesn't mean you've approved everything in it, but you're approving that direction so administration can continue their work. As projects come closer to fruition, they hit the long-term capital budgets and then they get scrutiny as they get funding."

Lyons said it's common for documents and reports to be technical in nature, but it's ultimately council's job to inform municipal staff whether the information they're receiving is clear enough to understand when making a decision.

"If staff are producing reports that council can't understand, council needs to go through the CAO and communicate reports be written at a level that is easier for them to understand so they can make informed decisions. ... It's part of the job," he said.

"Ultimately, big strategic decisions and policy decisions – even small policy decisions – are to be made by council. If council's not doing that, then it undermines the logic of how the system is supposed to work and also undermines democratic accountability."

Cuff highlighted councils are elected by the public to represent the community as a whole to ask questions and probe matters at each meeting, with council needing to be in the driver's seat of setting policy and direction.

"What did council think they were getting elected to do? They might want to sit back and have a good thorough discussion on who has what role," he said. "Now being two years into this term, I would suggest now is an ideal time to have that discussion. Without such a discussion, this is going to blow up in somebody's face."

"If they don't have a handle on that, that's going to really cause problems. Canmore's involved in a lot of sensitive issues. All of those require council oversight and council policy guidance. At some point, someone's going to ask 'who made that decision?'"

Williams said it is ultimately the role of councils to pass guiding documents.

She noted the example of the intensive nature City of Calgary council undergoes for its budget and high-level plans, with council oversight and direction necessary.

Though complicated, it's council's role to understand matters before them, she said.

"This isn't considered too difficult for the people that are supposed to be doing that oversight and scrutiny and who will be held responsible. Both transparency and accountability require this kind of scrutiny to take place," she said. "Council is representative of the people and have the responsibility for stewardship of tax dollars. ... To suggest it shouldn't be looked at and shouldn't be investigated, that there shouldn't be questions raised or debates engaged in fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the responsibility of elected officials."



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