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# EDITORIAL

## Governance, leadership requires council approve master plans

**T**he role of a municipal council is often misunderstood and difficult.

There can be responsibilities dumped on the local level by the upper tiers of the federal and provincial governments, while residents can be harsh with their criticism in wanting to get a specific way.

It may be unfair at times, but it's ultimately the job those elected signed up for and one residents felt confident in trusting their ability with 10s and 100s of millions of dollars of taxpayer dollars.

All councils have a fiduciary responsibility to their communities, but also the necessary authority and burden of leadership to direct master plans, guiding documents, bylaws and all high-level policies.

By not approving the Utility Master Plan and simply letting an update go by, Canmore council has abdicated the power and responsibility entrusted to them by voters in the 2021 municipal election. In not doing so, there's little point in having elected officials, who are expected to read and understand all key policies and if they aren't, the question turns to how information is relayed to help their decision-making.

It can be argued some documents that aid in the governance of a municipality are too technical, but it's municipal staff's job to relay information to council and the public in a way that's easy to understand. It's also the role of council to ensure if a document or report is too technical, that they've spent time with it and can send it back to receive better information.

It's the job both sides signed up for. And if information is not being relayed properly, neither staff nor council should leave council chambers until everything is understood.

The Utility Master Plan itself is dry reading, but guiding documents for a municipality are not meant to be on a best seller or end-of-year readers' list. They are meant to direct staff and help forecast the present and future of a municipality.

In that sense, the Utility Master Plan is among the most important documents and is completed roughly every five years. At an estimated \$200 million in short-

and long-term costs in the next 25 years, it could easily be argued outside of the land use bylaw and Municipal Development Plan there is no more important document.

From 2010 to 2016 to 2022, each Utility Master Plan has changed and evolved to react to developing circumstances in the community. It takes more than a rubberstamp to see it to the next stage of implementation and use it to inform other budgetary projects.

As part of the Utility Master Plan, it's vital in updating off-site levies to understand who is on the hook for the costs of expensive projects – developers, the municipality and the MD of Bighorn with Dead Man's Flats – and in that case the level of public engagement is necessary.

In future master plans, increased public engagement needs to be undertaken for long periods of time. Having meetings with development groups is vital, but excluding residents is an unintentional mistake.

In rural southwestern Ontario, in putting together its Water and Wastewater Master Plan, the upper tier regional government of Oxford County held a public consultation for eight months. After analyzing comments, working with municipal staff and consultants, it returned to council for its first draft. Following questions from council, a second public consultation was held that returned to council a second time in draft form.

After council received the second draft and asked questions ranging from storage capacity, lifecycle determination, population forecasts and many more, an additional 75-day comment period began that will return to council for final approval. Throughout the process, all videos and documents are available online as the draft master plan evolves to its final version.

Though painstakingly tedious, the thoroughly completed document is something that can move forward to help the short-, mid- and long-term needs of a municipality and ensure all interested parties are on the same wavelength.

Councils need to approve all master plans and guiding documents. A council role is underpaid, underappreciated and undervalued, but it's what's expected of them and it's what comes with the responsibility of the governance role.

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