

## News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



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### Statement from the Chair on current service levels and 2020 budget

**DUNCAN, BC** – “I know that there are many questions and concerns circulating in our communities around the impacts of COVID19 on service levels, financial considerations and taxation at the Cowichan Valley Regional District. This is a challenging time for everyone. Unprecedented really. All of us at the CVRD, board and staff, are keenly focussed on the issues presented during this crisis.

I encourage anyone who has suggestions or ideas to make things better through this time, please continue to reach out to us.

Over the last month, our staff have been dedicated to managing the changing landscape of service delivery in this COVID-19 crisis. In the initial phases our focus was on the health and safety of our staff, and our requirement to deliver core services safely and effectively. As we transitioned through these early days, new rules and recommendations came weekly, sometimes daily. We very much appreciate the science and fact-based approach during this time, and I would like to give a special shout out to Dr. Bonnie Henry and Minister of Health, Adrian Dix for their leadership. However, these continual changes resulted in constantly shifting sands under our feet and required our board and staff teams to respond accordingly. In the last 2 weeks or so, as the reality of this ‘new normal’ has settled in, staff continue to work towards increased service levels while honouring the recommendations coming from public health authorities and ensuring the safety of our staff and residents.

### SOLID WASTE

Of course, a notable area of concern is our Solid Waste operations. I’ll touch on this area briefly only by way of one example of the challenges our staff are working through.

In Solid Waste, the challenges are multi-faceted. We have a confluence of factors that have really resulted in a perfect storm of negative impacts. The most obvious symptom observed by our community members are of course lineups at our facilities and extended wait times.

Physical distancing requirements within facilities, may sound straight forward, but this in itself may be the single largest contributor to the issues we are facing. At Peerless Road for example, everything has had to change. From payment processing, to ensuring physical distance results in significantly slower processing times. In addition, to ensure this physical distance, only a fraction of regular traffic can be admitted to the facility at any given time. Instead of free items flowing in, through and out without much intervention, for example, staff are required to give direction, monitor customers and limit the number on site at any time. If we mentally walk through this process, or like me, you’ve had to experience it, this layer of oversight adds substantial time to each visit. Even with all of these considerations, we are still processing similar numbers of customers, and in fact, higher volumes than the same period last year during this time of limited service.

The confluence of issues I alluded to are not just limited to our facilities. Many more folks are home. The weather has been beautiful. I know if I had the time, I would be spending it in my yard

or home, doing so many of those seasonal projects and possibly even those long- neglected home improvements. This results in higher traffic levels and further compounds the challenges with physical distancing and resulting processing times.

Finally, a quick word on other challenges in Solid Waste. The operations of upstream and downstream partners have also been impacted by COVID-19. Whether it's a private recycling centre not being open, spring clean-up in our municipalities being cancelled due to inability of contractors to provide service, or hauling partners with their own limited capacities... each one of these issues contribute to the reality we are working through. I talk with our staff about these issues almost daily and know they are laser-focused on increasing service levels to the maximum extent possible, as quickly as possible. We would still implore customers to do whatever they can to limit non-essential trips to our facilities. But we understand that this is not always possible.

This is just one service area as an example, and the impacts of this 'new normal' are apparent in every service we offer. I will reaffirm the commitment staff has made to get service levels to the highest level possible, as soon as possible.

## **FINANCE AND TAXATION**

I think it is also important that I touch on our budget process and adoption.

Budgets for Regional Districts must be completed by March 31, unlike Municipalities who have until May 15 to submit their financial plans. The province was not willing to extend this deadline. The CVRD budget was adopted in December along with advance approval on selected capital works. This allows us to get a head start on key projects and operate through the entirety of the fiscal year with an adopted financial plan in place. In any normal year, this creates an advantage to project timing, allowing the CVRD to get projects out to tender early. In fact, our 2021 budget process will start shortly and staff are already making initial preparations in most departments. Unfortunately, it is not possible for the CVRD to amend the 2020 budget now to reduce the tax requisition for residents this year.

As the province collects taxes on behalf of the Regional District it is also not possible for the Regional District to change penalty dates. This is the responsibility of the Government of British Columbia.

All of this said, the CVRD has provided what modest relief we are able, through extending the discount period for CVRD utilities by 6 months to help alleviate what financial pressures we can. We also continue to advocate for relief from the provincial government in the form of a "Hardship Deferral". To date they have not indicated a willingness to provide additional relief to residential property owners.

The Government of BC has, however, provided some relief to local government and businesses in the last week. Relief for business includes a one-time reduction to the School Tax portion of their remittance for 2020, resulting in approximately 25% overall reduction in tax burden. They have also extended the penalty deadline to October 1 allowing class 4, 5, and 6 property owners to pay later in the year without penalty. This provides substantial relief to commercial and industrial property owners and is in combination with other programs at the federal and provincial level that include a 75% wage subsidy, no/low interest loan and commercial rent subsidies.

For local government relief, and in particular Regional Districts, most of the provisions to date have been to allow us to borrow from our reserves to compensate for lost revenues that have occurred as a result of program cancellations, facility closures and other reductions to non-tax revenue sources. Unfortunately, with the very different legislation governing regional districts, none of the provisions to date have made providing further tax relief for 2020 possible at this time.

As indicated previously, Regional Districts are quite limited in terms of flexibility to provide near-term financial relief, in contrast to municipal governments. Our staff continue to push forward to increase service levels. Our board continues to collect feedback and inform our staff team in terms of service levels. And finally, our board, and myself as Chair, continue to advocate on behalf of all businesses and residents in the CVRD for more support where required.

This is a challenging and unprecedented time for everyone. I want to assure you that the CVRD board and staff are working hard to ensure the best outcomes for everyone in the region. We are here to serve and support you.

Thank you.

Aaron Stone  
Chair, Cowichan Valley Regional District

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*For more information, please contact:*

Aaron Stone  
Chair, Cowichan Valley Regional District  
[chairperson@cprd.bc.ca](mailto:chairperson@cprd.bc.ca)