

Saskatoon City Council Comprehensive Meeting Statistics Review 2019/20 and 2020/21

ISSUE

In 2014, Saskatoon City Council made major reforms to its governance model, the first in almost two decades. One of the primary motivations for the overhaul was to improve transparency for City Council's policy development and decision-making processes. An outcome of those reforms was to report on how the system was meeting its intended objectives. Thus, how many hours did City Council, and its committees meet in 2019/20 and 2020/21? How many meetings were in public, how many in private? How does this compare with previous periods? Are there noticeable trends in the data that City Council should be aware of?

BACKGROUND

At its March 23, 2015, meeting, City Council considered a report from the Executive Committee (which it was named at the time) entitled, "Municipal Governance and Public Accountability". City Council resolved, among other things, "that a year-over-year comparison evaluation mechanism be developed".

At its January 22, 2018, meeting, the Governance and Priorities Committee (GPC) considered an information report from the Administration that compiled data on meetings of City Council and its committees between August 1, 2014, and July 31, 2017. GPC resolved to receive the report for information and "that a report be submitted to City Council recommending that the City Clerk's Office utilize the data from annual reporting to communicate with candidates running for City Council during the 2020 election".

At its January 21, 2019, meeting, GPC considered a similar report that updated the data for the August 1, 2017, to July 31, 2018, period. No additional direction emerged from the committee. However, the Administration did acknowledge it would update the data and provide a report to GPC for the 2018/19 period.

At its March 20, 2020, meeting GPC once again received an information report that offered an analysis of the 2018/19 meeting period. The Administration did acknowledge that it would update GPC on the 2019/20 meeting statistics in the first quarter of 2021. However, given the focus on managing the COVID-19 pandemic that report was delayed and is included with the 2020/21 analysis. That report also acknowledged the next review would include an analysis of the different report types considered at the committee meetings.

CURRENT STATUS

The Office of the City Clerk tracks various Council and committee statistics for each meeting of City Council, GPC, and the four Standing Policy Committees. In keeping with the above direction from GPC, this report provides a review and analysis of meetings of Saskatoon City Council and its main committees. Specifically, this year's report builds

on the previous ones and adds the periods 2019/20 and 2020/21 to the analysis. This edition adds new data on the different report types (information, decision, and approval) to the analysis. As a reminder, the reporting period coincides with the implementation of City Council's new governance model and is therefore not based on a calendar year.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Appendix 1 to this report provides a comprehensive review and analysis of meetings of City Council and its committees from 2014/15 to 2020/21 inclusive. The focus of the analysis is on the 2019/20 and 2020/21 meeting periods, the bulk of which were held in an online virtual format due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distance requirements. The recent data is often compared to the base year (period) of 2014/15, the first full meeting period of the new governance model. Ideally, the analysis would be compared against the previous governance model, but lack of reliable data and collection methods prevent this.

The data analysis found in Appendix 1 reveals that City Council and its committees:

- met a total of approximately 249 hours in each year, slightly below the six-year average of 251.9 hours.
- met in public for almost 205 hours in 2019/20 and 210 hours in the 2020/21 period. This is above the six-year average of 201 hours and an increase of 28 percent relative to the base year of 2014/15.
- in private (or In-Camera) for 43.5 hours (17.5 percent of total meeting hours) in 2019/20 and 40 hours (16 percent of total meeting hours) in 2020/21. For the 2020/21 year, In-Camera meeting hours have fallen by 72 hours or by 64.4 percent relative to the base year.
- in GPC for a total of 76 hours in 2020/21 a decrease of 52.5 hours from the base year. In 2020/21, GPC accounted for a total 30.5 percent of meeting hours a reduction of 16.6 percentage points since the base year.
- in the SPCs for a total of 94.8 hours in 2020/21, a 17.8 hour increase from the base year and sitting at the six-year average.
- engaged 180 speakers in 2019/20 and 203 speakers in 2020/21.
- considered 417 and 937 separate pieces of written correspondence in 2019/20 and 2020/21 respectively.
- the bulk of this interaction over the two periods centered on social policy issues such as conversion therapy and reconciliation (e.g., renaming of John A. MacDonald Road).

New for this version of the report is data on the different report types considered at council committees. The City reformed the report system in 2019 categorizing them as information, decision, and approval, and it collects data on the number and types of reports that are considered at each committee. The results reveal that:

- committees considered a total of 345 reports in 2019/20 and 287 reports in 2020/21.
- over half the reports presented to committee are information reports.
- about one-tenth of all reports are decisions reports.
- about one-third of all reports are approval reports.

More details about the City's report templates and approach are found in section 5 of the appendix.

Based on these findings, several observations can be made:

- The data suggests that City Council and committee meetings are largely dependent on the nature of the items on the agenda and the discussion or debate that ensues. Yearly, issues may emerge that will require extra attention of City Council and or its committees. This may also result in more In-Camera deliberations. This can make it difficult to conduct year-over-year comparisons because the types of items that City Council and committees deliberate on can change significantly from year-to-year. As more observations are collected, the use of more sophisticated data analysis methods could be implemented to better explain correlations, trends, and outliers.
- The data suggests that election years tend to have different patterns relative to non-election years given that fewer Council and committee meetings occur in those years. Now that the data set contains two election cycles, there is some consistency in meeting hours between the two cycles. Election cycles are also unique in that a new City Council typically spends extensive time in orientation and/or strategic planning meetings, when compared to non-election years. In such cases, more In-Camera sessions are likely required so that the newly elected City Council can set its priorities for the next term of its mandate.
- The data indicates that several of the reforms City Council and Administration have made to the governance structure, and more specifically, to public and In-Camera sessions, have had a positive impact on public accountability and transparency. A more stringent test has resulted in a reduced number of reasons as to why a matter may be deliberated in an In-Camera session. Moreover, City Council has adopted the best practice of rising and reporting in a public session to conclude an In-Camera session. This has added a degree of transparency because the public may know when an In-Camera session of a meeting concludes.
- Finally, the data suggests that reforms to any governance structure take time to fully realize their intended outcomes. No single year of data should be able to explain whether the intended reforms to a governance system have achieved the desired outcomes. Similarly, it does not mean that such changes will result in annual, linear reductions in the number of hours that Council and its committees debate issues in public or in private. The key is to observe what direction the trend cycle is heading and adjust to make progress towards a goal. Council and Administration need to be patient to let the system work, but also be flexible enough to adjust along the path as new learning, feedback, and technology emerges.

As explained in previous versions of this report, the primary goal of this exercise is to provide factual data that helps to better understand the nature and types of City Council and committee meetings. It is also useful to help provide some objective ways to measure transparency, although transparency can be a subjective measure. Transparency is concerned about the decision-making process and not necessarily the outcome. Whether or not an individual agrees with a Council decision, is separate and distinct from whether or not the process used to arrive at the decision was transparent. Transparency in municipal government revolves around whether or not decisions are made at public meetings, held in an open forum where the considerations and exchange of ideas and solutions are provided. The data and analysis offered by this report indicate transparency has improved significantly due to the City's governance reforms.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

NEXT STEPS

Unless otherwise directed, a similar report on the 2021/22 results will be tabled in the first quarter of 2023.

APPENDIX

1. A Review and Analysis of Saskatoon City Council and Committee Meetings 2019/20 and 2020/21 Edition.

Report Approval

Written by: Mike Jordan, Chief Public Policy and Government Relations Officer

Reviewed and

Approved by: Jeff Jorgenson, City Manager

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