



THE NUTS AND BOLTS: LOCAL COUNCIL MEETINGS

More than any other level of government, municipalities directly impact our daily lives. Over the years, Saskatchewan municipalities have struggled with issues such as store hours, smoking bans, casinos, curfews, garbage collection, recycling and road repair. The decisions they come to on these issues are made at local council meetings.

Local council meetings take place at regular intervals and are open to the public. At these meetings, council will debate and discuss the operation of the community, citizens are given the opportunity to speak about issues important to them, and laws governing the municipality are considered.

The laws made at a municipal level are called bylaws. Municipalities make bylaws for the “peace, order and good government” of the municipality, and for promoting the health, safety, and welfare of the community.

Bylaws can cover issues big or small. For example, the city of Saskatoon recently attempted to enact a city-wide anti-bullying bylaw. Meanwhile, the town of Shellbrook introduced a bylaw that limited garage sales after one went on every day all summer. As you can see, communities have the power to enact bylaws dealing with quite a range of issues.

Passing a bylaw takes place in several steps. Once a council decides that a bylaw is needed, the community’s administration prepares a draft of the bylaw. The draft will be presented at a council meeting to be considered and voted on. Bylaws are considered in stages:

FIRST READING - the bylaw is discussed and a vote is taken. The bylaw is not necessarily read aloud at the meeting. Members of council must be provided the opportunity to read the full text of the proposed bylaw before first reading.

SECOND READING - The bylaw is again discussed and a second a vote is taken. Amendments to the bylaw can be proposed by councillors as part of first or second reading. If council votes in favour of a proposed amendment, it becomes part of the proposed bylaw.

THIRD READING - The third reading usually takes place at a subsequent meeting. By waiting for a later meeting, the public is given a chance to provide input regarding the proposed bylaw and any amendments. If the vote is carried, the bylaw is considered passed and adopted.

SIGNING AND SEALING THE BYLAW - The mayor or reeve must sign the law to put it into force. This usually happens shortly after the final vote that passes the bylaw.

This process is open to the public. Citizens can speak at council to share their thoughts and concerns about local bylaws, or simply sit in on the meetings to observe debate and discussion. As well, municipal offices make documents publicly available so citizens can review things such as drafts of bylaws and reports to council.

Not all of council’s work is done in public, though. Councils and their committees can meet in private to discuss long-range or strategic plans and to discuss matters that cannot be discussed in public because of privacy legislation. However, all laws must be passed at public council meetings.

THINK Creating Fair Laws

1. Review the steps that must take place before a proposed bylaw can become a law. Why do you think bylaws are passed in stages?
2. Education scholars Michael W. Apple and Jeffery Beane have said that “Democracy is not simply a theory of self-interest that gives people license to pursue their own goals at the expense of others. The common good is a central feature of democracy.”
 - a) What is “the common good”?
 - b) How can local government ensure that they work towards the common good?
 - c) How can citizens ensure that local government works towards the common good?