

Ratepayer Association Template

Introduction:

This is a Ratepayer Association (RPA) guide, one that is:

- Focused on a single issue – curbing local government expenditures to reduce or, at least, restrain, the growth of property taxes and user fees;
- Active on a municipality-wide basis rather than in a specific geographic area of a municipality; and
- Does not necessarily need to involve participation by a broad-based membership to help achieve its objectives.

The RPA should be founded on two principles:

- *Coyne's law*, which states "Governments should only do what only governments can do." This means making clear choices about what activities local government should be engaged in, so that taxpayers' scarce dollars are used for only those goods and services that cannot be provided by individuals and businesses; and
- Government expenditures must be controlled to protect the taxpayers' collective purse from excessive pillaging.

Setting up a Ratepayers Group

Focus:

Keeping the RPA's focus on local government expenditures, related rates of taxation (ie. property taxes and user fees) and the need for greater efficiency in the delivery of local government services will help create widespread support for RPA initiatives and public policy recommendations. Thus, the RPA should concern itself with municipal spending and taxation issues.

Scope:

The RPA could represent the interests of all categories of taxpayer, residential, business and industrial.

Participation:

Modern North American life, with its seemingly incessant demands on people's time, coupled with the relatively tedious and complex nature of local governance matters, not to mention the cunning and guile of empire-building bureaucrats, means that a RPA based solely upon the anticipated mass participation of local taxpayers is unlikely to succeed and is, in fact, unnecessary.

Today, the trend is for people to not even vote in elections, municipal or otherwise, let alone become active members of a civic or service organization.

A RPA that involves a small number of members can be highly effective. The key to success is the composition of this membership.

To be successful in re-directing municipal governments, the RPA will need, first and foremost, to be seen as being credible. The persuasive force of its ideas and persistence, together with its choice of spokesperson, are central to credibility. Also, the collective educational accomplishments, occupational experience or service to the community of the RPA's members will be important to the organization's reputation.

Strategic Considerations:

Don't expect overnight results. A reasonable period of time (ie. one electoral cycle) should be chosen to seek influence over the public policy agenda. Remember, the key to political success means a politician must see which way the parade is going then jump to the front of the line. It takes time to create that parade.

Arguments for change must be well-crafted and accurate. Shoddy research or inept presentation will instantly undermine any influence that a RPA might hope to exert.

Principal sources of relevant information include:

- StatsCan and StatsBC (ie. population data)
- BC Ministry of Community Development web-site – Local Government section (ie. annual capital and operating expenditures listed by municipalities)
- Municipality's annual budget documents, "Schedules of Remuneration" (ie. filed each year pursuant to the Financial Information Act) and staffing reports.

A RPA should steer clear of any direct involvement in local politics. It should remain a non-partisan advocacy group, willing to work with whoever is elected to council.

Getting Started:

Once a core group is organized, the preliminary tasks should be:

- Assign responsibilities (chair, secretary, spokesperson, etc.);
- A spokesperson must be chosen to ensure the RPA “speaks with one voice.” He or she must not only be articulate, media savvy and presentable, they must be prepared to work diligently at establishing and maintaining contact with media representatives, elected officials, other community opinion leaders and, yes, selected senior bureaucrats at “City Hall.” The latter can, and often will, be helpful in providing advice and information;
- Decide on a name for the organization;
- Record all decisions, tasks to be done and by whom.

To create stability and reinforce the members’ commitment, the RPA should be incorporated pursuant to the provisions of the *BC Society Act*. This is a relatively straight-forward and inexpensive procedure. Annual reporting requirements are minimal. The key is the “purposes clause” of the constitution, which sets out the RPA’s objectives.

RPA members are volunteers and their time must be respected. Accordingly:

- Meetings should be infrequent (ie. no more than three or four per year) and relatively brief (ie. no more than ninety minutes in duration);
- An agenda should be distributed in advance of each meeting and minutes or, at least, an “action plan” ought to be produced following each meeting and relied upon to both provide institutional memory and encourage individual accountability;

A RPA should maintain an account in a financial institution.

- Members ought to each contribute a small amount per year (ie. \$100) so as to cover ongoing administrative expenses (ie. website hosting and domain name registration, post office box, photocopying, room rentals, etc.)
- Funds should be raised from members’ respective personal connections with family, friends and acquaintances resident in the municipality when required for specific purposes (ie. a newspaper advertising campaign or “town hall” meetings).
- The most effective and efficient way to raise money is via e-mail, with follow-up telephone calls if necessary. A RPA can and should be influential without the need to raise and spend much money.

Lastly, modern communications technology (ie. blogs, websites, broadcast e-mail, podcasts and “social media”), if employed with consistent skill, can be effective in overcoming obstacles the seeming unwillingness of people to participate in public policy development or the electoral process. While increasing numbers of taxpayers may not have the inclination or time to attend a council meeting or other public forum to show their support for a RPA initiative or proposal, once persuaded as to its efficacy or utility, they are likely to communicate their views to mayor and council via email or a website. The important thing is that the RPA message gets through to local government decision-makers.

Conclusion:

The three key weapons in a RPA's arsenal are 1) the quality of its analysis and ideas, 2) its focus and persistence and 3) its effective use of the internet.

The West Vancouver's *Interested Taxpayers' Action Committee* (ITAC) is an example of a successful RPA. It was, established by two individuals in January 2006. A copy of its constitution, filed in May 2008, is attached.

ITAC consists of 14 members, all residents of the municipality, including individuals with backgrounds in accounting, finance and community service, having held elected office on local council or school board.

It maintains an informational blog, www.thepluckedgoose.wordpress.com (which currently requires updating) and, on the basis of a single appeal via broadcast e-mail, made in March, 2007, raised over \$6,500 for a series of community newspaper advertisements encouraging West Vancouver residents to demand the District restrain its spending and end or curtail tax increases.

Arguably, ITAC's efforts over the past four years contributed significantly to the District of West Vancouver (DWV) imposing the lowest property tax increase for 2009 among the 22 municipalities in the Metro Vancouver region, as well as to making local government expenditures and related taxation rates the central issue of the November 2008 municipal election campaign. Sixty per cent or so of those who voted for DWV mayor in that election cast a ballot for a candidate who espoused a reduction in local government expenditures and the restraining of tax increases. In addition, an ITAC member was elected to council. In February 2010, again due in large part to ITAC's pressure, the DWV brought in a budget that involved a zero percent tax increase, believed to be unique in Metro Vancouver.

Sound arguments, some media savvy and persistence are the keys to successfully influencing public policy development at the local level, not to mention elsewhere. A RPA that follows this approach does not require a large membership in order to become a "player" on the local government scene.

June 15, 2010

FORM 1
SOCIETY ACT
Constitution

1. The name of the society is "INTERESTED TAXPAYERS' ACTION COMMITTEE"
2. The purposes of the society are as follows:
 - a) To foster and facilitate by all methods public awareness of the source, quantum, manner, efficiency of use, wisdom of use or other issues associated with the receipt or projected receipt of funds by local government organization and/or associated with the expenditure of local government funds, whether characterized as capital or operating expenditures or otherwise;
 - b) To foster and facilitate by all methods the analysis, debate and discussion of the source, quantum, manner, efficiency of use, wisdom of use or other issues associated with the receipt or projected receipt of funds by local government organization and/or associated with the expenditure of local governmental funds, whether characterized as capital or operating expenditures or otherwise;
 - c) To foster, encourage and facilitate by all methods the involvement of people in local self-government in all manners;
 - d) To solicit, receive and accept funds by gift, bequest or otherwise and apply these funds to the functions of the society; and
 - e) To address and attend to issues and matters arising from the purposes of the society referred to in paragraphs 2(a) through (d) and any other purposes of the society from time to time lawfully adopted by the Society.
3. The Society shall have perpetual succession and has power to acquire by purchase, gift, devise, bequest, trust agreement, contract or otherwise, real and personal property, and may hold, sell, dispose of, exchange, mortgage, lease, let, improve, and develop any such property, and without restricting the generality of the foregoing, may acquire in any way or ways real and personal property as is empowered by the Section.
4. The activities of the Society shall be carried on with out purpose of gain for its members and any income, profits or other accretions to the Society shall be used in promoting the purposes of the Society.
5. Upon the dissolution of the Society and after the payment of all its debts and liabilities, any remaining property shall be turned over, transferred and assigned to one or more recognized charitable organizations operating within the Province of British Columbia as directed by the members.
6. Paragraphs 3, 4, 5 and this Paragraph are unalterable.

Bylaws

The bylaws of the society are those set out in Schedule B to the *Society Act*.