

Karen Harper: You Knew There Were Better Ways

In 2023 she told Council other things had been done instead of a notice on title. Of the twenty notices registered since 2020, the minutes record her against one. Drawn from her statements to voters and Saanich's own minutes and meeting recordings.

What the record shows

1. Councillor Karen Harper knew there were better ways. On November 20, 2023 she told Council: "I am aware that other things have been done historically other than putting this title type of motion on through council, including just letters in the files." She voted against the notice on 4573 Prospect Lake Road, the only member of Council to do so [7]. Of the twenty Section 57 notices recorded since 2020, the minutes record her against that one [6].
2. Earlier that night Council registered the notice on 938 Ambassador Avenue. The minutes record no discussion and no vote against [6][16]. On July 14, 2025, with the owner's counsel telling Council the notice was affecting the sale, she asked staff to confirm that "the cost to remove this type of thing is five hundred dollars," asked whether Saanich could be liable if the notice were lifted, and then told Council: "My only question is was there unpermitted work?" She voted to confirm the notice [8].
3. She had asked about alternatives before. On July 4, 2022 Harry Bains appealed the notice on 5390 Old West Saanich Road. She asked staff: "Are there any other mechanisms that could be used in any way to solve this, such as covenanting?" Brent Reems answered that the notice "is meant to incent following our process" and "gets removed for a small administrative fee." She voted to reaffirm the notice [9]. Five weeks earlier, on May 30, 2022, she had seconded that notice. No question was asked and the owner did not appear [10].
4. She is running for mayor on efficient, accountable service and "meaningful consultation with our residents" [3][4]. In May 2021 she seconded the readings of the bylaw that implemented Council's new model of bylaw and parking enforcement [15]. From 2021 to 2025 the net cost of bylaw and parking enforcement rose from \$863,600 to \$1,598,600. Over the same years residents' rating of bylaw enforcement fell from 54 to 46 out of 100, and of building inspections and permits from 52 to 40 [20].

In her own words

What she said	What she did
"I'm not saying do away with services, I'm saying do it better." (2017) [1]	Voted for nineteen of the twenty Section 57 notices registered since 2020 [6]
On the Environmental Development Permit Area: "it needs to be rescinded but it needs to be rebuilt." (2017) [2]	Moved to rescind it after residents told Council it could affect property sales and values (2017) [14]. Voted to keep the notice on 938 Ambassador Avenue after counsel told Council it was affecting the sale (2025) [8]
"I am aware that other things have been done historically other than putting this title type of motion on through council." (November 20, 2023) [7]	"My only question is was there unpermitted work?" Voted to confirm the notice on 938 Ambassador Avenue (July 14, 2025) [8]

What she said	What she did
"Are there any other mechanisms that could be used in any way to solve this, such as covenanting?" (July 4, 2022) [9]	Voted to reaffirm the notice on 5390 Old West Saanich Road after being told it is removed "for a small administrative fee" [9]
"We need to ensure that we have meaningful consultation with our residents and businesses." (2026) [4]	Seconded the notice on 5390 Old West Saanich Road with no question asked and no owner present (May 30, 2022) [10]
"I will use this experience to work collaboratively with the public, businesses, staff and council to improve service delivery and costs." (2026) [3]	Sat on Council while bylaw enforcement costs rose 85 per cent and resident ratings fell (2021 to 2025) [20]
"The cost to remove this type of thing is five hundred dollars is it not." (July 14, 2025) [8]	The owner's cost to remove a notice is hundreds of thousands of dollars (see The hostage loop)

5. Each of those votes followed staff advice. Since December 2021 that administration has been led by Chief Administrative Officer Brent Reems. If the advice was wrong, it was his. The votes were hers.

The owners in front of her

Date and property	What Council heard	Her role
Feb 3, 2020, 3901 Ansell Road	The owner asked for another week or two; the project was complete except the stairs, and the stair access had been closed off	Voted for the notice [23]
Oct 18, 2021, 3979 Locarno Lane	The owner had submitted correspondence on the alleged contraventions	Seconded a two-week postponement to read it; voted for the notice on Nov 1 [11]
May 30, 2022, 1206 Judge Place	Construction confirmed by bylaw officers	Seconded the notice [10]
May 30, 2022, 5390 Old West Saanich Road	The owner was called three times and was not on the line	Seconded the notice; no question asked [10]
Jul 4, 2022, 5390 Old West Saanich Road	Harry Bains said he never received notice the item was coming to Council and that no construction had been done since he bought the property in 2018	Asked about a covenant; voted to reaffirm [9]
Nov 20, 2023, 938 Ambassador Avenue	No discussion recorded	Voted for the notice [6][16]
Nov 20, 2023, 4573 Prospect Lake Road	The owner said plans to bring the dwelling into compliance had been given to staff; the stair was pre-existing	The only vote against [7][21]
Jun 9, 2025, 1845 Fairburn Drive	The owners said the disclosure form at purchase showed all permits in place and that they had spent over \$100,000 on upgrades	Voted for the notice, 9 to 0 [22]

Date and property	What Council heard	Her role
Jul 14, 2025, 938 Ambassador Avenue	Counsel said the notice was affecting the sale and that the warrant was under review by the Provincial Court	Asked about the \$500; voted to confirm, 9 to 0 [8]

The night she said no

6. On November 20, 2023 the Manager of Inspection Services told Council the stair at 4573 Prospect Lake Road had to be replaced entirely. Councillor Harper told Council the case was "a little different than some of the other ones" because the stair was "a pre-existing condition," and that she would have preferred to postpone "and see if there is something that we could come up with as an alternative," keeping the matter on the record "in a slightly less legalistic way" [7]. Councillor Westhaver said her thoughts were aligned with Councillor Harper's. Council registered the notice; only Councillor Harper was opposed [7][21].
7. The alternatives she named, a letter on the property file or a postponement, were not moved that night, and the minutes from November 2023 to July 2026 record no motion from her to make them available to other owners [6].

The motion she seconded

8. On February 5, 2024 she seconded Councillor Chambers' motion asking staff to review the integrity and confidentiality of the complaint-driven bylaw system. When Councillor Chambers asked Council to defeat it, Councillor Harper concurred and told Council she "had also considered the possibility of referring just the topic of bylaw enforcement to strategic planning." Councillor de Vries moved that the motion be tabled indefinitely and bylaw enforcement referred to the Strategic Planning process. The referral carried [12]. Three months later, on May 6, 2024, she moved, "basing it on the staff recommendation," to remove "Bylaw enforcement being shared across different levels of government" from the strategic plan's Bike Rack, calling it "something that's not even possible to achieve given that you're looking at multiple levels of government." Councillor de Vries seconded. It carried [25]. In 2025 the Chief Administrative Officer told Council: "Items in the Bike Rack are not actioned" [26]. The minutes from February 2024 to July 2026 record no report to Council on bylaw enforcement under that referral [6].

The coded language

9. Staff give Council keywords instead of facts, and Council votes on them. Twice the keywords came in answer to her own questions [8][9]:

What Council was told	What the record shows
Removal costs \$500 (staff, confirming her question, July 14, 2025)	The \$500 is the District's registration fee. Removal requires permits, consultants and remedial work the District orders [9][17]
A notice "gets removed for a small administrative fee" (Reems, July 4, 2022, answering her question)	Minutes earlier Council was told removal takes a building permit application with plans, a completed project and staff confirmation of Building Code compliance [9]

What Council was told	What the record shows
"There could be some liability to the municipality" if the notice were lifted (staff, answering her, July 14, 2025)	No legal opinion, claim or dollar figure for that liability was put to Council [8][16]
"No financial implications" and a "\$500 fee" (Manager of Inspection Services, November 20, 2023)	Stated the fee and left out the cost [17]

The hostage loop

10. The District investigates the owner, enforces against him, can prosecute him, registers the encumbrance on his title, and then decides, at the same Council table and on the advice of the same staff, whether it comes off. The only key is compliance as the District defines it: the owner is unlawfully forced to open his private dwelling to the same bylaw officers who built the case against him, pays for permits, consultants and whatever remedial work they then order, and pays the District \$500 at the end. Until he does, the notice stays on title and the sale of his home is affected. The only appeal from Council's refusal is to court, at his expense.
11. Creation. The October 31, 2023 report recommended the notice because it "will reduce Saanich's liability exposure on this file" [16].
12. The key. Council was told the notice comes off for a \$500 fee once the property is brought into compliance with all regulations [16][17], and on July 14, 2025, in answer to Councillor Harper, that the fee is collected "when all the conditions have been met" [8]. The \$500 is only the District's registration fee. The cost of a Section 57 notice is hundreds of thousands of dollars. For this house, the title ransom starts at \$100,000 in consulting fees for the building permit alone, with remedial work ordered inside the dwelling up to \$250,000. It is paid on top of the District's fines and on top of double permit fees, which the owner of 4573 Prospect Lake Road told Council he paid [21]. A home renovation becomes an offence, and the owner is penalized twice: Harry Bains was fined and sent to collections, the owner of 4573 Prospect Lake Road paid his fines through the courts, and the owner of 938 Ambassador Avenue was prosecuted.
13. Who holds the key. Since Bylaw No. 9694 (2021), occupancy inspection and entry authority under the Zoning Bylaw extends to bylaw enforcement officers, not only building officials [18]. Councillor Harper was present when it passed; the minutes record no vote against [18]. The October 31, 2023 report told Council the violation was confirmed "by the Bylaw Officer" [16]. A bylaw enforcement officer is not a building official under the Building Act.
14. The pressure. While the notice stands, the owner is penalized with the loss of the ordinary ability to sell, finance and insure his home. Counsel told Council on July 14, 2025 that the notice was affecting the sale of 938 Ambassador Avenue [8]. In debate Councillor Harper told Council that "it's been a year and a half since this was originally dealt with" and that "there has been sufficient time for the matter to have been resolved in some other way had that been the desire of all the parties involved" [8].
15. The review. Cancellation under section 58 is decided by the Council that imposed the notice, on staff advice. On June 23, 2025 the Corporate Officer told Council that staff recommended

against removal because the contraventions "impact life and safety on the property" [19]. Council confirmed the notice nine to nothing on July 14, 2025 [8].

16. Two other owners were victimized by the same hostage loop. Councillor Harper seconded the notice on 5390 Old West Saanich Road on May 30, 2022 [10]. On July 4, 2022 Harry Bains told Council he never received notice that the item was coming to Council; the Clerk said letters had been sent by regular and registered mail on May 7, 2022. He told Council that he learned of it from the front page of the Saanich News, that his sale collapsed when his realtor warned him of a non-disclosure suit, that business licence and bylaw inspectors had fined him and sent him to collections, and that finishing the work would cost \$300,000. Staff told Council the key was a building permit, plans, a completed project and a final inspection. Council reaffirmed the notice with no vote against [9].
17. In 2023 the owner of 4573 Prospect Lake Road told Council he had paid his fines, gone to court, paid double permit fees, hired a designer, a geotechnical firm and two engineers, and met the District's inspector "every day." He told Council that inspector approved his stairs on February 23, 2023, that the Manager of Inspection Services overruled him, and that a retired inspector he hired found the stairs safe. The stair was existing and outside the scope of his work: he told Council it was in the house when he bought it in 2016 and was not part of his renovations, and Councillor Harper restated that on the record. The Manager of Inspection Services told Council there is no correction for such a stair short of replacing it entirely. Council registered the notice, with only Councillor Harper opposed [7][21].

What she brought to the table

18. In 2017 she moved to rescind the Environmental Development Permit Area, telling Council "it is time to start over" [14]. In September 2022 she moved for criteria allowing both a secondary suite and a garden suite on a property inside the Urban Containment Boundary; it carried [24]. In May 2023 she moved to refer public participation under the Council Procedure Bylaw to the Finance and Governance Standing Committee; it carried [24]. On June 24, 2024 she moved for a staff report on garden suites outside the Urban Containment Boundary; it was defeated three to six [13]. The minutes from 2017 to July 2026 record no motion from her on Section 57 notices or on the complaint-driven bylaw system [6].

Background

19. She was first elected to Saanich Council in a September 2017 byelection with 2,340 votes, and re-elected in 2018 and 2022 [1][2][6]. Before Council she was a vice-president and chief knowledge officer of the B.C. Pension Corporation [1][2]. She is running for mayor in 2026 "after nine years on council" [3][5].

About this review

20. The author, Christopher Caddell, owns 938 Ambassador Avenue and is in active litigation with the District of Saanich. This report is separate from that litigation. It is an independent analysis produced with a search engine built for the litigation, which indexes every open Saanich Council meeting since September 2017 (495 meetings and 12.2 million transcribed words) together with the District's agendas, minutes and financial statements. Every statement of fact is tied to a public record listed at the end.

Sources

- [1] Times Colonist, "How Karen Harper could change Saanich council" (2017).
- [2] CHEK News, "Saanich byelection winner, Karen Harper, wants to rescind and rebuild controversial EDPA" (2017).
- [3] District of Saanich, 2026 Candidate Profile Guide, General Local Election 2026 (Karen Harper, mayor).
- [4] Saanich News, "Saanich councillor releases platform as mayoral campaign takes shape" (September 7, 2026).
- [5] The Martlet, "Three-term councillor and MEd alum Karen Harper to run for Saanich mayor" (August 27, 2026).
- [6] District of Saanich Council minutes, 2017 to July 13, 2026, as held in the minutes archive.
- [7] Council meeting video transcript, November 20, 2023, 4573 Prospect Lake Road (approx. 2754 to 2774 s and 3045 to 3140 s); Council minutes, November 20, 2023, pp. 2 to 3.
- [8] Council meeting video transcript, July 14, 2025 (approx. 4149 to 4258 s and 4472 to 4522 s); Council minutes, July 14, 2025, Request to Cancel Notice on Title, 938 Ambassador Avenue.
- [9] Council meeting video transcript, July 4, 2022 (approx. 2819 to 2898 s); Council minutes, July 4, 2022, 5390 Old West Saanich Road, Appeal, pp. 2 to 3.
- [10] Council meeting video transcript, May 30, 2022 (approx. 587 s and 727 to 834 s); Council minutes, May 30, 2022, pp. 1 to 2.
- [11] Council minutes, October 18, 2021 and November 1, 2021, 3979 Locarno Lane.
- [12] Council minutes, February 5, 2024, Shared Bylaw Enforcement (Notice of Motion of Councillor Chambers), pp. 12 to 13; Council meeting video transcript, February 5, 2024 (approx. 9982 to 10135 s).
- [13] Council minutes, June 24, 2024, p. 14, garden suites outside the Urban Containment Boundary.
- [14] Special Committee of the Whole minutes, October 28, 2017, and Council minutes, November 6, 2017 and December 11, 2017, Environmental Development Permit Area.
- [15] Council minutes, May 3, 2021 and May 10, 2021, Bylaw Notice Enforcement Bylaw Amendment, No. 9692 (new model of bylaw and parking enforcement).
- [16] District of Saanich, Report to Council, Notice on Title, 938 Ambassador Avenue, October 31, 2023; Council minutes, November 20, 2023, p. 1.
- [17] Council meeting video transcript, November 20, 2023 (approx. 171 to 310 s).
- [18] Council minutes, May 3, May 31 and June 21, 2021, Zoning Bylaw Amendment, No. 9694.
- [19] Council meeting video transcript, June 23, 2025 (approx. 1053 to 1140 s); Council minutes, June 23, 2025.
- [20] District of Saanich Financial Plans 2019 to 2026, Bylaw and Parking Enforcement, net actuals 2021 to 2025; BC Stats, Saanich Citizen Satisfaction Survey Report, June 2021; BC Stats, 2024 Saanich Resident Pulse Survey, April 2025.
- [21] Council meeting video transcript, November 20, 2023, 4573 Prospect Lake Road (approx. 1700 to 3320 s); Council minutes, November 20, 2023, pp. 2 to 3.
- [22] Council minutes, June 9, 2025, 1845 Fairburn Drive, 323 Conway Road and 4029 Quadra Street; Council minutes, January 20, 2025, 67 Cadillac Avenue.
- [23] Council minutes, February 3, 2020, 3901 Ansell Road.
- [24] Council minutes, September 20, 2022 (secondary and garden suites) and May 8, 2023 (public participation).
- [25] Special Council and Committee of the Whole minutes, May 6, 2024, Strategic Plan Check In, pp. 4 to 5; meeting video transcript, May 6, 2024 (approx. 6323 to 6495 s).
- [26] Council minutes, May 12, 2025, Strategic Plan, p. 13.