

Meet the Man Who Really Runs Saanich

The mayor doesn't. Saanich's most powerful employee does, and nobody has ever reviewed his work.

VICTORIA, BC — Saanich voters elect a mayor and eight councillors. They do not elect the person who runs the District. The Chief Administrative Officer manages every department, every employee and every report that reaches the council table. Council hires him. Council is the only body that can hold him to account.

In September 2022, council voted to start doing that. Staff were directed to report back by year's end with options for regular performance evaluations of the CAO. Councillor Mersereau called it a trigger so the job would not fall by the wayside. Councillor Chambers said the CAO should not be checking his own performance standards. Brent Reems had been CAO for seven months.

Four years later, no such report appears in any open council agenda, minute or meeting recording.

How he got the job

Paul Thorkelsson had been Saanich's CAO for nearly seven years. On 29 November 2021 council fired him without cause and paid \$579,769 in severance, two years' salary, a figure that only became public when the Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Greater Victoria pried it out through freedom of information. Council gave no reason beyond "a new direction." Mayor Haynes said council had "cast their minds out 18 months" before acting.

Eighteen months before November 2021 is the spring of 2020, the moment the parking file landed on the desk of the Director of Building, Bylaw, Licensing and Legal Services. In the year that followed, Brent Reems brought council Report 1970-20, which expanded his own department into an enforcement service and floated a rental licensing regime; Bylaw 9694, which he described as housekeeping; and the waiver of the public hearing on it. Thorkelsson signed off on all three as CAO. The mayor described Reems as the director with his hand in every file.

Reems was appointed acting CAO the day Thorkelsson was removed. Interim CAO followed in February 2022. A five-year term followed in January 2023.

Nobody has said why Thorkelsson had to go. Council paid \$580,000 to remove one CAO without explanation and installed, the same day, the director who had spent the previous year building the department this release describes. Seven months later council voted to review his performance, and never did.

Here is what he built while nobody was reviewing him.

They asked him to come in. Then they served him.

Harry Bains is 67. He bought 5390 Old West Saanich Road in late 2018 and has never lifted a hammer on it. On 24 May 2022 two Saanich inspectors asked him to come to the municipal hall for a meeting "to resolve a situation on the property." He went.

"Instead, everybody disappeared to the back of the Saanich Hall," he told council, "and I got served papers to appear in criminal court room 103 on June the 1st."

Six days later council put a notice on his title. Nobody told him the meeting was happening. He learned about it from a newspaper article that named him. He phoned the District's legislative department, who confirmed they had no record of ever notifying him. An inspector, he said, had told him: "We're going to set an example with you, and we're going to have your house go up on a court sale."

He cancelled a hip replacement to appear at the appeal he was finally granted, on 4 July 2022. "I don't know what I'm appealing," he told council, "when I was never notified to be here."

Council reaffirmed the notice. Councillor Colin Plant moved it, as he had moved the original.

The safeguards that would have protected him were identified in 2018, then dropped

In May 2018, as Director of Building, Bylaw, Licensing and Legal Services, Reems told council Saanich fell short of six Ombudsperson standards for bylaw enforcement and recommended adopting all six. The policy he brought back in September omitted three: conduct standards for enforcement staff, rules on when officers may inspect private property, and any appeal process. He wrote that conduct standards would go on the District's website. They never appeared.

The parking report that wasn't about parking

Report 1970-20, January 2021, asked council for three officers to write parking tickets. At page 8, justifying a management restructure, it named the real ambition: enhancing the District's ability "to consider, pursue and plan for future opportunities, such as the regulation of short-term vacation rentals and a licensing program for rental housing." A licensing regime for every rental home in Saanich, inside a parking report. The same report proposed proactive patrols in place of complaint response, an internal power to redeploy officers to "priority enforcement issues" without returning to council, and a benchmark implying ten officers rather than five. Council endorsed it unanimously. Nobody asked.

Then he told council a bylaw changed nothing

Three months later, Councillor Plant asked whether a package of housekeeping amendments made any consequential changes to the bylaws. Reems said no. Minor amendments, largely grammar. Bylaw 9694 handed the bylaw department, and every enforcement officer in it, the power to inspect for occupancy and enter property under the Zoning Bylaw, a power previously held by one certified building official. In the very report that created those officers, Reems had argued building inspection must stay separate from bylaw enforcement because the Building Act sets mandatory qualifications. Bylaw 9694 merged what he had just told council to keep apart, and gave the officers exactly what a rental licensing regime needs.

Plant moved all three readings, seconded the waiver of the public hearing, and moved the adoption.

The councillor who votes on liability

Plant's stated reason for backing this machine is liability. February 2020, moving the first section 57 notice: he was "not comfortable exposing the municipality to any liability whether it's minute in possibility." September 2020, when an owner asked to lift a notice: "can you please remind Council what the liability would be if the title was taken off." January 2022: "what would be the harm or liability to the district if we were to put this notice on title in abeyance?"

He never asked that question when the CAO was in front of him. What Saanich now carries: 21 encumbered titles; an entry power granted without a hearing; a BC Supreme Court ruling that its Manager of Inspection Services' methodology was "conclusory and without an evidentiary foundation"; an open provincial Registrar file on whether unqualified officers made Building Code decisions; more than \$571,000 billed by prosecution counsel on a single file that produced six acquittals; and civil, human rights and tribunal proceedings arising from the same conduct. Plant moved or seconded ten of the 21 notices, more than anyone on council.

The councillor with the unpermitted barn

Councillor Nathalie Chambers knows what enforcement feels like. On 3 February 2020, seconding the first notice on title in the series, she told council: "Mr. Barbour will realize and remember that I too once had a permit that had gone out of expiration, and I had to take down a very loved tree house." Graham Barbour was the Manager of Inspection Services presenting the file. She voted to put the notice on another man's title.

Her own farm, Madrona Farm at 4317 Blenkinsop Road, advertises its barn on its website: "our good friend and well noted environmental/conservation activist, Ingmar Lee, used his amazing craftsmanship in the restoration of our barn. It is once again beautiful; if you love barns, sign up for the next farm tour." Ingmar Lee holds no Saanich business licence, no BC contractor licence and no certificate of competency in any construction trade. Saanich's own Development Tracker shows no building permit and no electrical permit for the work. The property is zoned for one residence; two appear to be occupied.

All of this was put to her in writing on 23 February 2024, with the Tracker record attached and council and the bylaw department copied. It followed the night of 20 November 2023, when she questioned the Manager of Inspection Services about 938 Ambassador Avenue while its owner was out of the country and had not been told the meeting was happening.

The single complaint against 938 Ambassador Avenue, from a disgruntled former occupant, put an officer at the door in three days. The written report to the bylaw department about a councillor's barn has produced nothing visible in thirty-one months.

On 14 July 2025 Chambers asked the CAO whether an owner who had been out of the country should get more time. He said procedural fairness had been afforded. She voted with the other eight.

The bill council was never shown

Every March, Saanich council sits as a committee to build the financial plan. Colin Plant is a fixture at that table. He seconded the 2020 budget resource requests. He moved the 2021 motion directing staff on the plan. He seconded the 2022 motion adding \$1.9 million to the capital plan, and the 2022 library budget. He moved the 2024 recommendations. He chairs the Capital Regional District. Finance is his subject.

What never appears in any of those plans is what the enforcement department costs Saanich in lawyers. Freedom of information records show external prosecution counsel billed the District more than \$571,000 on a single bylaw file, the one against 938 Ambassador Avenue. That prosecution produced six acquittals. The two remaining convictions rest on zoning provisions repealed and replaced before the charges were sworn, and are under appeal.

That is one file. The same enforcement conduct has generated a BC Supreme Court civil action for misfeasance, a BC Human Rights Tribunal proceeding, personal claims against named officers, a provincial Registrar investigation and a Supreme Court judgment in another owner's case that found the District's inspection methodology had no evidentiary foundation. None of that exposure is disclosed as a contingent liability in the financial plan council adopts each spring. The bylaw line shows \$1.6 million. The legal line shows nothing.

Plant has asked staff, on the record, what the liability would be if a homeowner's notice were lifted. He has never asked, on the record, what the liability is of the department that imposes them.

What council actually bought

Report 1970-20 promised each new officer would write 2,327 tickets a year, generating \$120,000. The three officers together have never exceeded 3,000. One police commissioner wrote 4,145 alone in 2019. The service cost \$644,700 in 2020 and \$1.6 million in 2025, on its way to \$1.75 million in a year the CAO was directed to find savings. Saanich spends more than \$100 to write a \$50 ticket, and has never reported a single ticket count back to council.

Residents noticed. BC Stats satisfaction with Saanich's bylaw services fell from 45% in 2022 to 29% in 2024. Building services fell to 19%, the lowest ever recorded.

Three owners asked to have their notices lifted. Three were refused. Bains in 2022. An owner whose deck at 1299 Camrose Crescent had been permitted in 1969 and approved by the Board of Variance, in 2020. And the owner of 938 Ambassador Avenue in 2025.

What his lawyer told council about 938 Ambassador Avenue

On 14 July 2025 David Milojkovic, counsel for the owner, laid the whole file in front of council. From the recording:

The complaint should never have been opened. Saanich's own 2018 Bylaw Enforcement Policy, section 1.3, says complaints about secondary suites are investigated only on two separate written complaints from residents of separate dwellings within 100 metres who are not occupants of the property. There was one complaint. It came from a man who had lived in the basement of the house for

four years, moved out after a falling-out, and filed it the same month. Section 1.7 says vexatious complaints will not be acted on. Saanich acted on it.

They tried to force the door before they had a warrant. A bylaw officer demanded an inspection in November 2022 and, refused, threatened criminal obstruction charges. In February 2023 two Saanich employees arrived with Saanich police and attempted to force entry. They failed.

When they came back with a warrant, a woman was hurt. In July 2023 bylaw and building officials, police and two locksmiths executed a search. Council heard that officers shoved the front door open against someone trying to close it, struck a woman inside in the face, and gave her a concussion. She was not the owner. The warrant and the search are under constitutional challenge in Provincial Court, where the court had already ruled against Saanich's attempt to have the challenge summarily dismissed.

The photos from that search are the only evidence the notice rests on. Council was told there is nothing else.

Saanich knew he had a lawyer and mailed the notice to an empty house anyway. From April 2023, and again from August 2023, Saanich had written confirmation that the owner was represented and that all communication should go through counsel. When the District decided to put a notice on his title in November 2023, it sent the report by registered and regular mail to the property. He was out of the country. Nobody told his lawyer. The registered letter came back unclaimed nine days after council voted. The owner learned his title was encumbered after the fact.

Council's Director of Legislative Services told members that these matters were "separate" and did not prevent the District exercising its authority. Councillor Phelps Bondaroff rose on a point of order to stop counsel naming the complainant or the officers. Councillor Chambers asked whether an owner out of the country should get more time. Reems, the CAO, answered: "our position is that there's been procedural fairness afforded." Nine to nothing.

The prosecution that grew from the same search has cost Saanich more than \$571,000 in outside counsel and produced six acquittals.

"Council hired one employee and then stopped looking at him," says Christopher Caddell.

"Harry Bains was invited in for a meeting and served at the counter. Four years without a review, and this is what grew in the dark. These are unlawful encumbrances Saanich chose to add, and the District holds the only key."

Available on request: the council recordings of 3 February 2020, 28 September 2020, 3 May 2021, 10 January 2022 and 4 July 2022; the 2018 reports and adopted policy; Report 1970-20; the before-and-after text of Zoning Bylaw s. 11.2; the September 2022 evaluation motion; the November 2021 severance record; financial plan committee minutes of 2020 to 2024; FOI ticket-count and prosecution-cost records; BC Stats survey results; financial plans; minutes for all 21 notices and all three refusals; the 23 February 2024 letter to Councillor Chambers with the Development Tracker record for 4317 Blenkinsop Road; the madronafarm.ca Projects page; the council recording of 3 February 2020; BOABC and Registrar correspondence; and the *Kinney v. District of Saanich*, 2025 BCSC 1132 reasons.

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