

BRITISH COLUMBIA HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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Mayor and Council
The Corporation of the District of Saanich
770 Vernon Ave
Victoria BC V8X 2W7
council@saanich.ca

May 12, 2019

Re: Permissive Tax Exemption Process Review

Dear Mayor and Council

Saanich is an increasingly diverse and irreligious community. With the opportunity to review the District's policy on permissive tax exemptions, we urge you to vote to move toward a public benefits test for churches.

Vancouver Island broadly is one of the least religious regions in Canada. In the 2011 National Household Survey 48% of residents of the District of Saanich reported having no religious affiliation.¹ Statistics Canada only measures religious identification and not actual attendance at religious services. Surveys of religious attendance show that as few as 3% of people on Vancouver Island attend religious services on a weekly basis and 72% never attend church.² This follows a precipitous decline in religious attendance across the province in the past decade.³ Based on these statistics, the overwhelming majority of Saanich residents are subsidizing a dwindling number of church attendees.

Further, as Saanich becomes a more diverse community, it's important that Council be seen to be welcoming and supportive of that diversity. Nearly every church that receives a permissive tax exemption is a Christian denomination (with the possible exceptions of the Unitarians and Mormons, although both are deeply connected with Christian traditions). This means the roughly 6% of Saanich residents who identify with non-Christian religions receive no direct benefit. The same is true for the 48% of non-

¹ <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=5917021&Data=Count&SearchText=saanich&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=Religion&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

² <https://researchco.ca/2019/04/18/thats-me-in-the-corner/>

³ https://www.bchumanist.ca/frequent_religious_attendance_falls_to_3_in_british_columbia

religious residents as there are no Humanist or non-religious equivalents to a church in Saanich.

Additionally, several of the churches that receive this entitlement preach against the dignity and human rights of other Saanich residents, notably women, LGBTQ2+ individuals and those considering an assisted death. While everyone is entitled to freedom of religion under the Charter, the Supreme Court of Canada has recently affirmed that the state has an interest in advancing equality, even where doing so may infringe upon religious freedom.⁴

Adopting a public benefits test for churches would help Council ensure that the subsidies afforded to religious properties are used in ways that benefit the broader community. From our research, approximately one-third of BC municipalities that provide permissive tax exemptions for religious properties require those organizations pass a public benefits test.⁵ Most notably for the District, the City of Victoria has had a public benefits test since 2012.

To promote fairness for the taxpayers of the District of Saanich, we recommend council adopt option 3(b) in the staff report, directing staff to report back on the implementation of a public benefits test for church exemptions.

Sincerely

Ian Bushfield
Executive Director

⁴ Law Society of British Columbia v. Trinity Western University, 2018 SCC 32, [2018] 2 S.C.R. 293 <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/17140/index.do>

⁵ https://www.bchumanist.ca/bc_religious_property_tax_exemptions_data