

Sammamish Seniors “Community Conversation” with City Manager Scott MacColl

March 8, 2023

Once again the Sammamish City Manager, Scott MacColl, joined us for a wide-ranging discussion of issues relevant to the residents of Sammamish. Tom Ehlers presided over a largely question and answer conversation.

Tom prefaced the conversation with the news that the Proposal for Senior Programming had been awarded to the Indian American Community Association (IACS). Tom thanked Scott and the City for putting some \$85,000 per year in the biennial budget as well as providing use of the Beaver Lake Lodge for senior activities. He welcomed Scott once more to these Wednesday conversations, the first one since Scott was selected as the Sammamish City Manager. He also expressed kudos to the City for once again distributing the City Newsletter in print to all of the Sammamish households.

Scott gave us a brief overview of his biography and his role as City Manager. He is a third generation Seattle native and a graduate of the University of Washington; in fact, his grandfather was one of the founders of Group Health (now Kaiser Permanente). One of his first jobs was with the Red Cross, several levels below our Norm Bottenberg and Joyce who were with the Red Cross for years. Scott studied government in graduate school, worked on the State Legislature staff, government relations for the City of Shoreline, as an independent consultant and, finally, with the City of Sammamish. He sees his role as City Manager is to implement Council goals and direction. He is working on a dashboard to monitor the status towards achieving their goals.

Question: If the Council doesn't provide clear direction, what does the City Manager do?

Answer: Generally, check back with the Council for further explication. Staff's role is to provide professional recommendations. It is all about relationships when it comes to trying to get agreement. He tries to build relationships individually and collectively with the Council. The Council should be reflecting the desires of the community.

Question: How do you handle changing philosophy of the Council.

Answer: By setting goals and start with those as the base and hope that subsequent Councils can keep some measure of continuity moving forward. Beyond that, staff has to pivot when Council goals change.

Question: What experience of yours is most helpful in your current role?

Answer: Interactions are almost daily with the electeds. When I worked for the Washington State House there was an equal number of Democrats and Republicans so every committee had two chairs, generally representing the extremes of their caucuses and had a hard time agreeing on anything. So the path was to find common ground as individuals, and that was good experience for my current job.

Question: Sammamish is most like what city?

Answer: Sammamish is somewhat of an anomaly, but like Mill Creek in many ways. A few commercial areas and infrastructure created early on through a whole lot of homeowner associations. Generally, cities have a three-legged stool of revenues; sales tax, property tax, and business tax. Property tax is the dominant leg in a residential community and this makes the stool somewhat tipsy prone.

Question: What might create a better revenue base?

Answer: The City is in the process of updating the Comprehensive Plan and it includes an economic development element, so this will be a factor being considered in the next year.

Question: The Council discussed the work plan last night and there was very little discussion about the Town Center. Last year the first phase was approved, but we haven't heard about subsequent development negotiations.

Answer: The Town Center is definite a goal of the Council. We hear often about Ace Hardware which went away from Sammamish. We would hope to partner with the Chamber of Commerce to bring more business into Sammamish. With the current neighborhood centers owned and operated by absentee owners, it is difficult to know their current thinking regarding vacant spaces and future plans.

Question: So what is the current thinking on the Town Center?

Answer: The Town Center plan and zoning has been in place for quite some time (TC Plan passed around 2008). If there is a desire to do something different than the Plan, it is incumbent upon the property owners to bring those ideas forward to the Council.

Question: How does the property tax increase work?

Answer: In the Newsletter there is a pie chart which shows that the City is only about 14% of the total tax bill. In April King County will have a mental health levy lift on the ballot. If the citizens vote increase taxes by vote, that is above the 1% limit per year that taxes can be increased by State law. The City is on the 1% cap increase in taxes limit each year without going to a vote of the residents. That 1% increase amounts to about \$300,000 increase in City revenues each year, plus new construction. What is confusing is that the assessor values property based on the market, and you might find that real estate assessment in Sammamish might increase on the average 30% or 40%, but since the taxes collected can only increase 1%, then the levy rate (\$ taxes per \$1,000 assessed value) must go down accordingly. Of course, your property might increase in assessed value greater than the average and in that case indeed your tax bill to the City might increase more than 1%.

Question: What are your biggest worries and what are you most excited about?

Answer: Sammamish is at a growth point; it turns 25 years old next year. We are trying to mature the staff, grow professionally and build a robust Comprehensive Plan for the next 10 years. We know that we are going to grow. Tech workers, even if they lose their jobs, don't necessarily have to leave the area to get a new job. The Growth Management Act (GMA, passed in 1990) created an artificial restriction on land. Sammamish is mostly built out, so when we grow we will have to grow up. How do we collectively figure out how to do that? The Comp Plan will identify the capital plan. It is a big heavy lift getting the Comp Plan update completed in the next 1 to 2 years.

Question: How do accessory dwelling units (ADUs) participate in handling the growth?

Answer: ADUs don't move the needle very much. Very few are built here or in other cities. One at a time is a slow way to handle growth. The main growth area now is the Town Center. Brownstone West is already approved. The next step will include 6 over 1 (six stories of wood framed residential over one level of retail and possible underground garages of concrete and steel.

Tom: Then the City gets fees from construction and business and property taxes ongoing.

Question: How does the operating budget look with full staff and how is the staff feeling?

Answer: The City is trying to keep people engaged. We have a hybrid work force because many workers can't afford to live here. We have good relations with the union (which represents about 2/3 of the workers) and morale is better. For example on one job posting we had current staff reaching out to connections saying that it's a good place to work. Maintenance workers who interact with the public are the front door to staff.

Question: Communications has been tough, but I love the new newsletter and website. However it seems that the link to public art is gone from the website and I can't seem to find the minutes to some commission meetings.

Answer: We are working on finishing the website. The Search function is really good. Our IT and Communications teams are the author of this.

Question: Next year is indeed our 25th birthday. Is the City planning anything special and possibly an advisory committee?

Answer: We were just discussing this today. Yes, the City will do a 25th. Talking it through and will make it a theme for the year.

Question: What is the perspective on trails such as connecting trails to Big Rock Park from the Commons and Emerald Necklace?

Answer? That is a great lead in to getting involved in the PRO plan update this year. Parks dollars and purchase plans; possible Plateau to Lake Sammamish pedestrian connections. Next Tuesday evening the Council will discuss plans for Big Rock Park South and Beaton Hill Park. The meeting starts at 6:30 but there will be a special ceremony related to a gift to the City from the Snoqualmie Tribe. The middle page of the newsletter has links.

Question: Any further comments, Scott?

Answer: Scott appreciated our time with him and can't encourage us enough to get engaged in the planning processes and on all levels.

Question: Do you have an unsung hero award for staff?

Answer: Check on page 4 of the newsletter where you see employee of the year, team of the year and project of the year, plus 6 employees recognized for great public service. We'll be publishing the newsletter every couple of months, plus the recreation guide. Rather than every month we will start this way and see how the response is. We don't have a local newspaper anymore and there is a need for a community calendar and virtual board to get non-city sponsored events information out.