

Committee of the Whole Report



Date: February 22, 2006
To: Mayor and Council
From: Gail Price-Douglas
Community Development Planner
Department: Parks, Recreation & Community Development
Subject: The Establishment of a Poet Laureate Position
for the City of Victoria

Executive Summary:

At the August 11, 2005 Council meeting, local poet Wendy Morton requested that Council create a Poet Laureate position for the City of Victoria. The request was referred to Parks, Recreation & Community Development. Staff have reviewed six municipalities that have Poet Laureate positions across Canada. These include: Halifax, Edmonton, Brampton, New Westminster, Toronto and St. John's. Supporting material from these cities is contained in the attached appendixes. There are also two Provincial Poet Laureates in P.E.I. and Saskatchewan, and the Federal Government has a National Poet Laureate.

In these other cities, a Poet Laureate position is of great benefit to municipal government, as it serves as a cultural and literary ambassador for the City. The Poet Laureates are available at civic and community events, and therefore make poetry more accessible to the public. In becoming the Poet Laureate for the City of Victoria, an established poet who is selected for this position would receive formal recognition of their work, and be recognized for their significant contribution to literary arts. The poet would be expected to serve as an ambassador of arts and culture and play a leadership role within the literary community.

The duties of a City of Victoria Poet Laureate position could include: producing at least three new original works each year that reflect Victoria's culture, heritage and people; presenting poetry works of significance at civic fundraising events, City Council meetings, two other official functions a year and the annual City of Victoria Butler Book Prize Award. The Poet Laureate would be required to reside in the Capital Regional District, and would be appointed for a three year term, to coincide with the term of Council.

The recommended budget includes an honourarium for the Poet Laureate of \$1,500.00 per year, (based on the comparable size of the City of Halifax), and \$1,000 for administrative costs (business cards, website, etc.).

The Greater Victoria Public Library has been approached to be a Community Partner with the City of Victoria in establishing a Poet Laureate position. The Library is keen to assist the City in launching the position for this year, and would provide staff support in coordinating the selection process.

The background section outlines the benefits of the position and proposes some terms of reference criteria related to duties, selection process, publicity, and promotion.

Staff recommend that Council establish a Poet Laureate position for the City of Victoria and presents two options for Council's consideration:

- Option A Establish the Poet Laureate position in 2006, and allocate funds (\$2,500) from the 2006 budget.

- Option B Adopt the Poet Laureate position in principle and defer funding to 2007 budget discussions.

Victoria has a strong literary tradition. Edmonton's Poet Laureate, Alice Major, recently said that "some of the best poets of our generation live in Victoria". By establishing the honorary position of "City of Victoria Poet Laureate", Council will reinforce support for the literary community as a whole.

Recommendations:

- That City Council establish a Poet Laureate position for the City of Victoria commencing in 2006 in accordance with the Terms of Reference attached.

- That the City of Victoria approve an honourarium for the Poet Laureate of \$1,500.00 per year, and \$1,000.00 annually for administration and that these funds be allocated from the 2006 budget.

- That City Council endorse the Community Partnership with the Greater Victoria Public Library to establish the Poet Laureate position.

Respectfully submitted,

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City of Victoria Establishing a Poet Laureate Position Background

A. Background

Throughout history, Poet Laureates have been established in England and the United States. The tradition of having a “bard” started in England in 1670 and continues to the present day. The Federal Government of Canada established its Poet Laureate position in 2002 to encourage and promote the importance of literature, culture and language, by drawing the public’s attention to poetry, both spoken and written, and to the nature of and need for poetry. The provinces of Saskatchewan and P.E.I. have also established Poet Laureates. The B.C Provincial Government Cultural Services branch is currently researching establishing a provincial position.

B. Lessons Learned

There are six Canadian cities that have Poet Laureates: Halifax, St. John’s (just being developed), Toronto, Brantford, New Westminster and Edmonton. Discussions with both staff and existing Poet Laureates highlighted some of the issues and approaches from other cities.

Benefits

All six cities felt there were substantial benefits to both the municipality, the public, and the poets. The ambassador role of the poet and the community outreach component was seen to be very important. Poems are read at community gatherings, in community settings which makes the poetry “come alive” and demystifies the art form. People in the community who have never experienced much poetry have an opportunity to hear it spoken. Many Poet Laureates are involved in poetry readings and special festivals, etc. April is Poetry Month across Canada, where many national poetry events take place and the Poet Laureates play a role in promoting poetry that month.

Recognition

The Poet Laureate positions are earned by reputation and body of work and are an honour to receive. It is important that the position not be seen as ‘tokenism’ but rather be given the respect that poets deserve. The challenge of the position is to combine the private aesthetics of poetry with the public duties of the laureate. The Poet Laureates in Edmonton and Brantford both felt proud to be their City’s Poet Laureates, and have the desire to make people aware of the strength of the arts community. The City of Victoria and Capital Regional District have some of the most prolific and best poets in Canada. This position could highlight the contribution poets are making in the region.

Remuneration

The Poet Laureates interviewed felt that financial remuneration was not the most important factor. Brantford’s Poet Laureate is not paid, and feels the City honours him through the designation. Edmonton’s Poet Laureate felt the honourarium of \$5,000.00 was earned by the amount of work required by the position, the poems produced and other civic duties. Mayors and Councils in all six cities have had very positive feedback on the Poet Laureate position in their city.

C. Analysis

Benefits of the Position to the City of Victoria

The position of a Poet Laureate would recognize a poet whose poems display excellence and resonate with people in the community. The establishment of a Poet Laureate position would be a benefit for the City, as it would act as an arts and cultural ambassador and be a visible symbol of the City’s support of the arts. “The Greater Victoria area is rich with poets, and may have more celebrated and prize winner poets per capita than any other city in Canada”. (Quote from Wendy Morton, Appendix IV). The Poet Laureate would be an advocate for poetry and the arts and serve as a focal point for the expression of Victoria’s culture.

Benefits to the Public

The benefit to the public would be a larger public exposure to poetry. Poetry can be viewed as an inaccessible literary art form, and having a Poet Laureate who reads poetry at civic and other functions, would demystify poetry and bring it alive. Outreach by the Poet Laureate to other community groups would make them more aware of the strength of the literary arts.

Benefits to the Poet

The benefits of the Poet Laureate to the selected poet would be the formal recognition of the excellence of their work. Being honoured by the City earns them the reputation of being an established and distinguished leader in their field.

Administration & Coordination

In reviewing the options for administrating the Poet Laureate position, staff had discussions with the Greater Victoria Public Library, the Butler Book Prize Society, the Malahat Review, the Vancouver Island School of Writing and the CRD Arts Development Office.

The consensus was that a partnership with the Greater Victoria Public Library would be most beneficial for both parties. The Library is very interested in partnering with the City on the establishment of the Poet Laureate position, and is prepared to provide the leadership for the Steering Committee and poet selection process. Other municipalities have also partnered with the Public Library for their Poet Laureate's positions. It sees opportunities for mutual development and enrichment working with the City of Victoria in implementing the Poet Laureate position.

Coordination/administration of the position would be provided by the Community Development Division of Parks, Recreation & Community Development Department. The City would provide administrative support (including access to meeting rooms, photocopying, business cards, space on our website and promotion of activities).

Funding the Poet Laureate

Annual funding for the position would include a \$1,500.00 honourarium for the Poet Laureate, and \$1,000 for the administration of the position for a total annual budget of \$2,500.00. This is proposed to be included in the Arts and Culture business unit of the Community Development Division's budget.

City of Victoria
Establishing a Poet Laureate Position
Terms of Reference

1. Criteria for Selection

The selection criteria will include: the Poet Laureate must have made a significant contribution to poetry and the literary life of Victoria, and must reside in the Capital Regional District. The poet must have produced a minimum of two published works (not self-published), as well as other publications that display literary excellence. S/he must have influenced other writers, and some of their writing should include poems about Victoria subjects that comment on the life of the City, and are significant to the citizens of Victoria.

2. Duties

The Poet Laureate is a literary ambassador to the City and, as part of the position's role, s/he will be expected to produce at least three new original works in each year of their term that reflects Victoria's culture, heritage and people. They would also present, in person, works of significance at civic fundraising events, City Council meetings, two official functions a year, and be a speaker at the annual City of Victoria Butler Book Prize. The Poet Laureate will read selections of work that reflect on the themes of the civic events and functions, and on the life of the community. These selections could be their own work, or other author's work that are of high quality.

3. Frequency of Award

The Poet Laureate will be selected for a period of three years to coincide with the inaugural of Council.

4. Selection Committee

The City of Victoria, in partnership with the Greater Victoria Public Library Society, will undertake the selection process for the Poet Laureate, once every 3 years. The library will provide in-kind support of staff time to oversee the process of selecting the poet, and the Selection Committee. An expert Selection Committee will be composed of 3-5 Committee members from the literary community that could include: poets, librarians, teachers, publishers, writers and/or a member of the general public with an interest in literature. One City Councillor will be an ex-officio member of the Committee.

5. Selection Process

Selected poets will be invited to submit applications to be the Poet Laureate to the Greater Victoria Public Library once every 3 years. The Selection Committee will also recommend poets. The Committee will meet with selected candidates and the poets would read a selection of their work, and describe their vision for the position as literary ambassador. The Committee will make their recommendation to City Council and the Poet Laureate will be announced in October prior to the inauguration of the new Council at a City Council meeting.

6. Intellectual Property

All writing, notes and original materials produced during the tenure of the Poet Laureate will remain the property of the individual Poet Laureate.

7. Publicity & Promotion

The City of Victoria will promote the work of the Poet Laureate on its website. The City presently supports the annual City of Victoria Butler Book Prize, which will be expected to promote the Poet Laureate as a speaker at its annual event. Business cards and e-mail support will promote the position. The Library's website will also provide a link to the Poet Laureate and promote the position through their promotional materials.