

memorandum

DATE: February 12, 2015

TO: MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF COUNCIL

FROM: JEFFREY A. ABRAMS, CITY CLERK

RE: COMMUNICATION – IMPROVING CITIZEN UNDERSTANDING OF COUNCIL
RECOMMENDATIONS AND REPORTS
Committee of the Whole Report No. 7, Item 19
February 17, 2015

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Item #	19
Report No.	7 (CW)
Council - February 17/15	

Recommendation:

1. That the recommendation of Committee of the Whole be replaced with the following:
 - 1) That by May 2015, a brief plain language synopsis or executive summary be included in complex reports submitted to committees; and
 - 2) That report-writing refresher training be provided to all authors of committee reports.

Background:

Synopsis: This communication recommends a change to Committee's recommendation that the formal report template be amended to provide for a plain language synopsis in technical and complex reports. Instead, it recommends that staff be trained on including a plain language synopsis or executive summary in reports based on the existing template. The existing template will be revisited after the City Clerk's Office upcoming operational review.

At its meeting of February 3, 2015, during its consideration of Item 19 of Report No. 7, Committee of the Whole directed that staff report to Council on a new section to be included in the standard report template for technical and complex reports so as to provide for a short plain language synopsis of those items. Implementation of this new format was directed to be in place by May 2015.

For Council's information, staff have already begun to modify the approach to writing technical and complex reports, including the use of executive summaries. In the event that Council approves the recommendations set out in this communication, staff will be advised to include either an executive summary or a synopsis as the first segment under the "Background – Analysis and Options" portion of the current staff report template.

The inclusion of a plain language overview can be accommodated without a formal change to the staff report template. Changing the template requires an amendment to the procedure by-law, along with public notice, and would result in an unintended requirement for a synopsis/executive summary to be included in even the most routine reports.

The recommendations set out in this Communication can be accomplished without formal by-law amendment.

Staff who undertake report-writing training are advised on how to properly use the existing template fields. For example, the "Purpose" section of the template should reflect the actual purpose of the report, awareness of which influences the writing style in the report. To illustrate, a planning report destined to become part of the record of an Ontario Municipal Board hearing will contain planning and legal text styles intended to influence the outcome of the matter. On the other hand, the purpose of an information report, or a routine item (such as a proclamation report), can be written entirely in plainer language.

This communication proposes that an executive summary or synopsis be included in reports their authors consider to be complex or overly technical. Care will be taken, however, so that the plain language overview, whatever its form, does not give rise to potential misinterpretation of the detailed or technical language that might be set out elsewhere in the report.

The plain language overviews would be in a form similar to the paragraph which appears at the beginning of this communication.

If in synopsis format:

"This report covers the following topics to support the City's position...":

"This is the fourth report on the development of a policy to....".

If in executive summary format:

"This report begins with an overview of what has happened to date in this matter. It goes on to cover technical issue 1, technical issue 2.... A series of recommendations covering the following general topics are made, and the report concludes that..."

A well-written synopsis or executive summary can be an effective communication tool, particularly in conjunction with the proper use of the other sections of the report template.

For example, in using the existing staff report template report writers should note that:

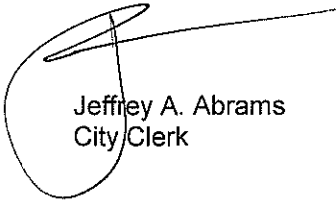
- The title of a report should be informative and distinct. Writers should recognize that the title is helpful in providing context for the report, and improves indexing and research.
- The recommendations in a report (or a communication) represent the 'business end' of the document. They should be straightforward and include only those directions that are operational or procedurally necessary, and be written in a way that anticipates potential amendments. The story-telling is best left for the body of a report – the recommendations are a key component of the public record and require careful crafting.
- The Purpose section not only provides the reader with better context for the remainder of the report, it assists the writer in structuring the report. Without a proper sense of the intended purpose of a report, the message in a report can be lost.
- Sections such as Economic Impact, Communication Plan, Relationship to Vaughan Vision 2020/Strategic Plan, Regional Implications are sometimes not fully relevant given the context of a report. When applicable, writers should take care to be direct and include all necessary references and detail.
- The Background - Analysis and Options section represents the heart of any report. The existing template allows for a great deal of flexibility in the writing of this section. For example, in training report writers are encouraged to:
 - Use Executive Summaries or a Synopsis
 - Use 'talking headers'. A talking header is the lead sentence in a paragraph that in essence summarizes the message in the paragraph or paragraphs that follow. By scanning the Purpose of a report, the talking headers, and the Conclusion of a report, the reader should be sufficiently informed to understand the recommendations in the

report, or at the least be better prepared to understand the deeper complexities in the report when reading it.

- The Conclusion should actually conclude the underlying theme of the report. It should not merely summarize the arguments already made.

For these reasons it is being recommended that the formal report template not be amended at this time, but that staff be instructed to include either a plain language synopsis or executive summary in reports where warranted. The report submission process will be included within the scope of an upcoming operational review of the City Clerk's Office. If appropriate, substantive changes to the report template will be made after the review through the adoption of amendments to the procedural by-law.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey A. Abrams", is written over a large, loopy circular mark. The signature is positioned to the left of the printed name and title.

Jeffrey A. Abrams
City Clerk