

Favourite words used in the business of politics

by Sabine Eiche

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Words matter to politicians. They can use them like lures to attract voters. Because words matter to me, too, I find such political lures alluring, though for a different reason.

But first, a quick look at lure itself. Deriving from the Proto-Germanic “lothran,” to call, it’s a Middle English word for the bunch of feathers with which falconers recall their trained birds of prey. The meaning of lure as something that entices or tempts was originally used figuratively.

Shortly before the recent municipal elections, voters received the “2014 Richmond Voter’s Guide,” containing profiles of the candidates running for office. Reading those of the councillors now elected, I noticed that many sprinkle their statements with abstract words, a favourite recourse of politicians (in fact, the only councillor who appears to prefer concrete to abstract words is Harold Steves).

The way politicians use abstract nouns such as sustainability, livability, accountability, reminds me of the practice of decorating stores at gift-giving times of the year with elaborately wrapped boxes. Like these display boxes, abstract words are eye-catching and tempting – but they’re empty of anything tangible, of anything our senses can grasp. They stand for ideas and concepts, which can be adapted and molded as required (by politicians, by circumstance). Some of these words entered our vocabulary only recently – the general sense of sustainability, for example, is first recorded in 1972.

A recurring word in the “Voter’s Guide” is community, referring to a smaller or larger group of people linked by a common denominator, which can be social, religious, political, cultural, athletic, geographical, and so on. When the reference is to the community of Richmond, I interpret the word in the geographical sense to mean a

community of place, sometimes used as a synonym for other labels such as municipality, city.

The City of Richmond has an attractive, information-packed website, its homepage headed by the declaration that “our” vision is “For the City of Richmond to be the most appealing, livable, and well-managed community in Canada.” In the section entitled “Sustainability & Environment” is a link to a long document called the “Sustainability Progress Report,” in which it is stated (Introduction, p. 2) that “A sustainable community is one where all residents have the opportunity to lead fulfilling, happy lives, while at the same time enhancing the well-being of future generations and the long-term integrity of our ecosystems.”

Another section of Richmond’s website – “Planning, Building & Development” – treats Richmond’s “Official Community Plan.” In the introduction it’s explained that “... a community is comprised of many interests (for example, residents, property owners, community groups, developers, investors) ...”

I checked the websites of other local authorities in Metro Vancouver, and while certain words are repeated like a mantra – vibrant, livable, sustainable, appealing, safe, thriving – I couldn’t find another instance where developers and investors ranked alongside the usual members of a community, that is residents and property owners.

Words matter, especially when they’re official. Am I wrong to worry about “our” community of Richmond comprising developers and investors?