

2022-71 Heywood v Vancouver Sun

January 31, 2023

The National NewsMedia Council dismissed a complaint about accuracy in an October 13, 2022, article, "North Vancouver Election 2022: Traffic congestion, development dominate debate," published by the Vancouver Sun.

The article outlined key issues ahead of the municipal elections for Vancouver's North Shore communities, including debate surrounding housing, infrastructure, and taxes.

Mayoral candidate for the City of North Vancouver Robert Guy Heywood filed a complaint with the NNC stating concern with the accuracy of the tax figures cited in the article.

He argued that the statement, "usually it's the district [of North Vancouver], with its 25-per-cent higher municipal taxes and utility fees, that's the one pushing for a merger," was not correct, and stated that tax rates are actually higher in the City of North Vancouver compared to the District of North Vancouver. He also took issue with utility fees and tax rates being grouped together.

In addition, the complainant took issue with how municipalities report their tax rates and noted that the article should have relied on more recent data from 2022, rather than citing a memo from the City of Vancouver to compare tax rates.

The complainant pointed out that the municipal taxes in the City of North Vancouver have been increasing over time, and that despite being a "poorer" community, City residents are taxed more than residents of the District.

The news organization responded to his concerns by stating that the figure in question was based on the memo hyperlinked in the piece, and that readers care about both taxes and utility fees together, as that sum more accurately reflects the total amounts paid by residents each year.

In reviewing the matter, the NNC agreed that the province's website indicates that the municipal tax rates for 2022 are higher in the City (at 1.68313) compared to the District (at 1.57023). The NNC also agreed with the complainant that discussion over taxation is an important policy issue that should be covered by news outlets clearly and accurately.

However, in reviewing the article in question, the NNC noted that it accurately reflected the 2021 tax rates and utility fees as outlined in the memo cited. The memo is hyperlinked for readers, so that they may have a deeper understanding of where the figures come from and how they were determined. Further, the NNC observed that the figures cited in the memo were consistent with the 2021 municipal tax rates as published by the municipalities.

The NNC has consistently noted that journalists are free to select sources they deem credible. In this case, it is reasonable to cite a report prepared by the municipal government for the purpose of comparing fees paid by residents, including taxes and utilities, for readers. While we understand that the complainant also took issue with how municipalities report their tax rates,

the NNC has no mandate over how cities choose to publish information.

The complainant's concern over taxation rates, and the issue of utility fees, appears to be a criticism of the relevant policies and districting issues, and not an issue of journalistic standards. In this case, the NNC found no grounds to support a complaint about a breach of the journalistic standard of accuracy.

The complainant was also concerned that despite his position on redistricting being reported on in the piece, he was not given an opportunity to comment on the issue. The NNC would point out that it is standard practice for journalists to report on the positions, perspectives, and public statements of elected officials and candidates. Referencing such public information does not necessarily merit further comment.

In this case, the NNC would note that the article compared a number of policy positions from various mayoral candidates and included comments from constituents on the issues in question.

The NNC recognizes that the complainant has a particular perspective and analysis that he wishes to share with a wider audience. For that reason, the NNC suggested that he consider submitting a letter to the editor for the Sun's consideration. However, it is important to note that news organizations are not required to publish letters and have the discretion to select the letters they see as best serving their readers.

For the reasons outlined above, the NNC found no grounds to indicate a breach of journalistic standards in this case and dismissed the complaint.