TO: MAYOR & COUNCILLORS

FROM: GENERAL MANAGER CORPORATE SERVICES

SUBJECT: **LANGUAGE TRANSLATIONS IN BURNABY**

PURPOSE: To seek Council direction on the implementation of a structured approach to language translations in Burnaby, with a recommendation to endorse Phase 1 of the Translation Adoption Framework.

RECOMMENDATION

> **THAT** the implementation of Phase 1 of the Translation Adoption Framework as outlined in the report titled "Language Translations in Burnaby" June 24, 2025 be endorsed; and

> **THAT** the amount of $130,000 from Operating Surplus to support the implementation of Phase 1 be approved.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks Council's direction on adopting a structured approach to language translations in Burnaby. Staff recommends implementing Phase 1 of the Translation Adoption Framework, which includes developing guidelines, policies, and internal change management to improve translation consistency and accuracy. This phase will address the immediate need for translations while laying groundwork for the development of further policies and guidelines.

1.0 POLICY SECTION

Language translation and access aligns with the following Council-adopted policies, plans, and strategies:

- Burnaby Anti-Racism Framework (2024),
- Corporate Strategic Plan (2022),
- Equity Policy (2020),and
- Social Sustainability Strategy (2011).

2.0 BACKGROUND

At the Council meeting on May 8, 2023, Council passed the following motion:

"THAT staff begin work on a robust and equitable translation policy, starting with consultation with language groups and community stakeholders, and a review of best practices for translation policy."

This report responds to the request, where City staff conducted a review of the City's current practices, assessed best practices in other municipalities and organizations, and consulted with interested parties to develop a proposed framework on language translation in Burnaby.

3.0 GENERAL INFORMATION

Burnaby is a diverse city with over 120 languages spoken at home. Effective communication is essential for engaging with diverse audiences. Translation plays a pivotal role in ensuring messages are understood across different languages and cultures.

3.1 Current Practices

Currently, the City does not have a City-wide policy or guidelines on language translations, leading to decentralized and inconsistent practices. The City uses ad hoc translation methods for multilingual translations based on operational needs, available resources and preparation time. This has led to inconsistencies across City communications to multilingual residents and individuals with limited proficiency in English.

The City's communication methods are summarized below.

3.2 Digital Translations

The City uses third-party translators and tools. These tools can provide full translation, partial translation or have limited functionality. These platforms include:

- Burnaby.ca, the City's primary communications tool, can be easily accessed in 103 different languages through Google Translate.
- Burnaby.ca/yourvoice (the City's public engagement platform), has translation capabilities focusing on City's top 10 languages (based on 2021 Census data) through Google Translate and other third party translators.
- Printed materials are translated by third-party translators on an ad hoc basis, depending on operational needs, available resources and preparation time.
- Digital advertising translation relies on the capabilities of the media where the ads are placed.
- Social media generally offers auto-translation features.

3.3 In-person Translations

The City provides limited in-person translation services, utilizing existing staff language knowledge and proficiency. These examples include:

- The City's Customer Service Centre currently has staff proficient in 5 languages and is currently reviewing external translation services.
- Staff use translation apps on their smart phones to facilitate in-person conversations or to access the City's language bank, a database of staff indicating their proficiency in different languages. The language bank is currently being reviewed and revitalized.

3.4 Community Profile - Languages

Burnaby is exceptionally diverse and unique. Findings from the 2021 Census illustrate some unique characteristics to Burnaby (see further details in Attachment 1). Key highlights are below:

- 75% of the population speaks either English (57%), Mandarin (10%) or Cantonese (8%) at home.
- There is a significant number of smaller language groups within the remaining 25% of the population speaking one of the 120 different languages at home.
- Approximately 100 languages are spoken by fewer than 500 people each.

This unique diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for effective communication with the community. Engaging with diverse language-speaking groups requires significant resources, including staff and external translation experts, to ensure messages retain their original impact and emotion. The large number of languages spoken by a small number of people, compounded by numerous dialects, adds to the complexity.

3.5 Community Insights

Through the support of the Burnaby Intercultural Planning Table, City staff engaged with the Immigrant Advisory Council for feedback on language access. Staff also reviewed comparable organizations to gain insights into their policies and practices. Learnings included:

- Many municipalities do not have established language translations policies and, like Burnaby, are in the process of developing them. Vancouver adopted a translation policy[1] in June 2023, and Surrey endorsed a multilingual framework[2] in July 2024.
- Approaches to the policies and frameworks are crafted based on the specific needs and the diversity of the community it's being developed for.
- Flexibility is essential when developing policies or frameworks, as the community's diversity continually evolves and changes, and new

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[1] City of Vancouver Language Access policy: https://policy.vancouver.ca/ADMIN073.pdf

[2] City of Surrey Multilingual Communications Policy: https://www.surrey.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-reports/CR_2024-R151.pdf

technological tools for translations become available. Policies and frameworks should consider the changing needs of the community and those who face the greatest barriers.

- It is impractical to translate all materials into every language in the community. The focus is on key language groups and prioritizing messages that will greatly impact residents.
- Technological solutions continue to advance and online translations services have improved over the years.
- The complexity of translation is increased by the presence of multiple dialects within a language, generational differences, language variations in neighbourhoods and the fact that "word-for-word" translations often miss cultural context and nuances. A deeper understanding of cultural differences and lived experiences will improve this process.
- Using clear and straightforward (plain) language aids in the translation process.

3.6 Proposed Approach

Based on the current practices, community insights and the City's multilingual community profile, a new approach to translated communications is being proposed that reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of Burnaby.

The goal is to enhance the City's communications to reach more people with limited English proficiency and prioritize the languages spoken at home by the greatest proportion of the City's residents. This approach is similar to the City of Vancouver's Hierarchy of Information model where the translation efforts are based on the type of content. The content is categorized into four information categories:

1. Critical information,
2. Compliance/regulatory information,
3. Participatory information, and
4. Awareness building information.

An analysis of language by percentages and population in Burnaby, along with the ability for available technology to automatically translate, resulted in the following thresholds for different message types (see table below). For example, for critical messaging, the City will translate the message if 1% or more of the population speaks that language.

TABLE 1: HIERARCHY OF INFORMATION MODEL SUMMARY

Type	Definition	Threshold
Critical	Immediate or direct health and safety of residents and/or sudden disruption of City critical services (i.e. extreme heat warnings, emergency alerts).	1% of population or more
Compliance /Regulatory	Follow regulations or bylaws which may have direct negative consequences. (i.e. fines, fees).	5% of population or more
Participatory	Encourage use of City services, participation in activities or changes in behaviour (i.e. engagement survey)	Top 10 languages via burnaby.ca/yourvoice
Awareness Building	Build general awareness without expectation of further action by the public (i.e. promotional marketing).	103 languages via burnaby.ca

NOTE: Generally, critical, compliance/regulatory, and participatory content is posted on the City's website, burnaby.ca. Since the website is quickly translated into 103 languages, various language groups will have access to this information. The categories above refer to additional efforts to connect with larger language populations.

Staff would plan on using the hierarchy of information model as a pilot to continue gathering more community insights as well as to monitor and respond to the efficacy of the model over time.

3.7 Translation Adoption Framework Recommendations

The Translation Adoption Framework outlines a progression from the current status quo to an ideal state of comprehensive translations.

- **Status Quo:** Ad hoc translations based on need, budget, and time constraints.
- **Phase 1 (Basic Translation):** Develop a business case, guidelines, policy, and internal change management strategies. Focus on Information Hierarchy approach and review new translation tools and service providers.
- **Phase 2 (Advanced Translation):** Build on Phase 1, target priority language groups with culturally nuanced translations. Increase outreach and community engagement.
- **Phase 3 (Ideal State):** Build on Phase 2, incorporate transcreation to ensure content fully resonates with local audiences, considering cultural idioms and preferences.

Therefore, it is recommended that Council endorse the implementation of Phase 1 of the Translation Adoption Framework. This phase would direct staff to develop a language translation plan for the City.

4.0 COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The implementation of Phase 1 will involve further consultation with the community to determine the best methods to communicate with an exceptionally diverse population. This process will help to develop future recommendations on the translation services to meet the community's needs.

5.0 FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The implementation of Phase 1 will require $130,000 of new funding for an external consultant with expertise in multilingual communications to develop guidelines, along with policy development. This review may result in additional third-party translation service providers as well as technological tools and services.

Respectfully submitted,

Juli Halliwell, General Manager Corporate Services

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Language Translations: Community Profile

REPORT CONTRIBUTORS

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