

Don Cayo: Passion for tax policy stems from passion for fairness

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Paul Sullivan of Burgess Cawley Sullivan and Associates.

Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER — It is an unlikely journey from unemployed waiter to thriving business owner and high-profile property tax guru.

But in 1992, while Paul Sullivan may have already had both the boundless energy and the love of competition he is known for today, the only tools in his job-hunting kit were a shiny new arts degree from UBC and a razor-thin resume. He had been an on-again, off-again waiter during his school years, and during a 1 1/2-year interlude in his education, he had been half-owner of a very fun but money-losing restaurant on Robson Street.

Twenty-one years later, now aged 45, he has worked his way up to senior partner in Burgess Cawley Sullivan & Associates, a Vancouver-based real estate appraisal and property tax consultancy that he helped to grow into one of Western Canada's largest. He has also made a name for himself as an often-quoted thorn in the side of civic bureaucrats and politicians who he believes are too easily satisfied with an unfair or inefficient status quo.

Sullivan is stepping down from his role as one of two main spokesmen for the business-oriented Vancouver Fair Tax Coalition, but he will remain a technical adviser, and he retains several other

volunteer roles. In other words, he shows no sign of giving up his high-profile niche as an analyst and lobbyist who is always armed to the teeth with hard-to-dispute facts and hard-to-refute logic.

About 20 per cent of his work week, he says, is given over such volunteer activities.

“I make my living off the commercial taxpayer,” he says. “So I give a lot back.”

And while he has been known more than once to focus his steely analytical eye on various ways homeowners get shafted by policies from City Hall, his focus is business issues.

“Business doesn’t have a vote in Vancouver,” he says by way of explanation. “I support business, and I am also a business owner. So I’m going to throw my skills at that agenda and do what I can.

“Things piss me off. I don’t like what I see. I don’t like the way things are justified.

“My world, my expertise, is built around evidence to support what you do. Politics isn’t. I have a problem with that when it comes on the back of the business taxpayer.”

It wasn’t an interest in property tax — although it was real estate, which was his dad’s field — that first brought him in the door of the firm where he now occupies the corner office.

He came, with his failed business and his geography degree under his belt, to ask Geoff Burgess, the founding partner, for advice on what he should do next. He left three hours later with a job “in a field that I knew absolutely nothing about.”

“I was the first arts major this firm ever hired,” he recalls. “And I was the lowest-paid employee they had ever had at \$1,200 a month. I often thought it was unfair.

“But the real estate industry is made of building blocks. You put the time in, and you become expert in that field.

“I worked on the appraisal side for eight or 10 years, then moved to the property tax side. There you have to take your appraisal expertise, you have to add case law and legislation, then you have to mesh it with a relationship. You have to convince other people of your point of view and resolve what can be fairly adversarial cases.

“It was a personal side of business. Appraisal is much less so.

“I like the interaction of people. I like developing the clients. And I enjoy the challenge of solving complicated problems. So eventually I went 100 per cent into that field.”

Ten years ago, he made partner. And the firm has grown fast.

“Our revenues are multiples of what it was 10 years ago” he says. “From a staffing perspective, for the first 10 years it was always a struggle between keeping seven or eight or 10 employees. Now we have

30 and growing.”

His family assets have enjoyed a boom based on similar building blocks, starting with a \$318,000 one on West 18th Street shortly after he and his wife, Andrea, were married in the mid-1990s.

“We put a basement suite in. We went to demo houses and collected parts to fix it. We had a \$2,000 line of credit we maxed out every month, and paid off at the end of the month, and maxed out again.

“That \$318,000 house sold for \$450,000. We bought one for \$450,000 and sold it for \$600,000. We bought one for \$650,000 and sold it for \$1 million, and on and on.”

Their current house, number eight in 19 years of marriage, is on an acreage in Southlands with room to keep Charliehorse, his recently acquired horse, and ponies for his two girls.

“We worked hard to get what we have,” he said. “But we were lucky we got in when we did.

“You used to be able to build a house for \$100 a square foot. Now it costs \$400. Land has tripled, construction costs have tripled. The price of entry is way out of reach for so many young people.”

Concern about the consequences of runaway house prices — as well as huge property tax bills that are insensitive to how much people earn, and perversities in how citizens are treated, and much more — is what inspires him to put in the hours on his advocacy work.

“But I don’t call it anger I feel,” he said. “I call it passion.

“And I don’t take it home.

“My home life is very important to me. I spend a lot of time with my two daughters (11 and 13) and my wife. We have tonnes of common interests. We do a lot together. And there will never, ever be any friction from the office in my home.”

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