

POLITICS AS USUAL: A Fundamental Shift

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

In pre-paration for this week's column I had a gander at the agenda for the September 10 Council meeting.

There's a lot to chew on from a political commentary perspective, however, I'd like to focus on one particular item that seems rather innocuous but is not in fact ? in my opinion ? what it seems.

The interesting little item is agenda item number four.

The report ? just a scant few pages ? speaks to quality of life issues for staff that result from having to stay at Council meetings late into the evening. Council meetings, as we know, start at 7 p.m. and are supposed to end at 10 p.m., though they regularly go on until 11 and sometimes midnight or beyond.

Staff and Councillors alike are then expected to get up and go to work on time the next day. Everyone is tired. This seems to be the crux of the issue and the impetus for the report. Staff are therefore asking for Council's permission to ??review the meeting times of General Committee and Council and bring a report back to General Committee.?

It seems fairly straight forward. I know I used to be pretty tired the next day after a Council meeting; particularly those that ended in the wee hours of the morning. An earlier start time might be advantageous.

However, in my opinion, an earlier start time is not what they have in mind. When you read through the short report, the intent of the motion becomes fairly evident ? that staff want to move Council and Committee meetings to daytime hours as opposed to evening hours.

On what do I make that assertion? The report makes note that the evening meetings result in considerable lieu time and overtime accumulation for many staff members.

This is a significant cost to the municipality. So, how else to you avoid lieu time being amassed as a result of meetings that go beyond the end of business? Have the meetings during business hours, that's how.

So, what this report is really asking Council is to review whether Council/Committee meetings can be held during regular office hours so that staff can get home on time, not amass countless lieu time hours, and generally be more productive the next day following Council meetings.

They'd like this report to be finished in time for the 2014 election so that those running for office are aware of the new parameters. Should this motion pass and Council agree to this consideration, what this means then is anyone that has a regular job, anyone that works between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., will no longer be able to run for public office.

This is a monumental shift in how we, as a community, will be governed.

No longer will ordinary working people be able to serve their community as Council members. Only those that can take time off during the day to attend meetings will be able to run for office.

This is simply not acceptable.

Daytime meetings are for full time Councillors as they are paid a full-time salary and expected to hold no other position. Part-time Councillors are just that ? part time; in other words they are most often employed elsewhere in a full time capacity giving a good part of their free time as part-time Councillors in service to the community.

Part-time Councillors have always been drawn from the broadest spectrum of the community ? which necessarily includes those that hold regular jobs. I would hate to see this change.

If Council does consider this motion, then they should limit the review to a consideration of late afternoon/early evening meeting times ? say those that start after 4 pm. That way, those that work will still be able to run for office. I think that's a more reasonable option.

Given the significant implications, a consideration of a move to daytime meetings requires a much broader public consultation process than a simple staff report and Council vote.

We should have a right to say whether there will be limits on who can run for office in our community, don't you think?

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved, because this is, after all, Our Town.