

POLITICS AS USUAL: A Very Public Vote

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

As of 4.30 p.m. Friday, we officially have 18 candidates for the Council vacancy; citizens of sound mind and body, willing and eager to assume the mantle of governance on our behalf. God help them!

There are some familiar names on the list ? former councillors, local business owners and volunteers, and some new names too. There are even a few municipal election candidates thrown in for good measure.

Of those eligible citizens that have stepped forward, each has submitted their nomination form and will be expected to attend the council meeting of July 29 and, in three minutes or less, explain to Council why he or she should be selected as the appointee to fill the vacant Council seat.

Councillors are allowed to ask two questions, then will deliberate, and make their decision.

The voting process will function ostensibly like a leadership convention run-off with multiple ballots and names being dropped off along the way until the ultimate ?winner? is announced. If no candidate gets the requisite majority and Council is deadlocked in a tie for the last two candidates standing, then the appointee will be drawn by lot. So, in other words, if all else fails, flip a coin.

And all of this will be public. Very, very public.

Councillors will be expected to state their choice of candidate ? verbally ? while all the other candidates and their families and friends must sit there and listen. It will be awkward at best, humiliating at worst, like some adult version of a schoolyard stick ball team selection.

I don't envy the candidates or the councillors. How awful for them all.

I understand that there is a need to be seen to be ?open? and ?transparent.? However, this is one of those times that the pendulum has swung too far to the right in the accountability spectrum.

Other municipalities have used this very same process ? most recently Richmond Hill in 2013. However, I was not aware of the particulars ? or implications of the particulars of the voting process, and I very much doubt the candidates are aware either.

I do not mean to criticize here as I understand the intention and staff's reasoning, but I have to say that I think the proposed voting methodology and argument in support of same is seriously flawed.

By virtue of the Municipal Act, all Council decisions must be public. The Act does not ? however - require all Council deliberations to be public. That's what closed sessions are for: business deals, legal matters and issues concerning publicly identifiable people.

It seems to me that selection of a publicly identified candidate for Council appointment would qualify as meeting the criteria for closed session deliberations.

When council makes appointments to advisory committees, the deliberations are in closed session, and the vote to ratify the decision is public. For example, Council recently went into closed session to deliberate appointments to the Joint Compliance Audit Committee. The reasons for closed session deliberations of appointments are obvious: to save people embarrassment.

Who would subject themselves to public vetting just to hold municipal office (yes, yes, elections are a very public vetting. But it is a collective vetting, by secret ballot, not a public vetting by individuals declaring ?yay? or ?nay? in a metaphorical coliseum).

So, I ask you ? if appointments to an advisory committee are deliberated in closed session and decisions ratified publicly, why are Council appointments treated any differently?

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