

POLITICS AS USUAL: Enough with Expenses

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I am going to resist the urge to discuss nay, whine about the weather. I think it would be stating the obvious to say that so far this spring has been less than spectacular.

It has, in fact, been truly horrendous.

Friday pretty much took the cake for incredibly awful weather. I mean, an ice storm? I've heard of April showers, but April ice pellets? No thank you! However, in the words of the indomitable Dolly Parton (yes,

I am quoting Dolly Parton), "If you want the rainbows, ya gotta put up with the rain?" So enough about the weather. It will change for the better. Soon.

Speaking of changing like the weather, can we please change the channel regarding, or at least the focus of, Council discussions please? I know we won't be able to manage to get all councillors off what seems to be a never ending silly script of inanities, but I hope we can get the majority to move it along.

I have said this before but I will say it again as it bears repeating. With less than 18 months of the term left and just 8 scant months before the silly season of electioneering begins, there is a great deal of work to be done, so they should get to it.

After this week's meeting, I have to say that I am beginning to find the discussions downright tiresome. I don't know if you readers managed to catch the last Council meeting (April 9) on Rogers, but suffice to say, it started early and ended very late with two extensions of the hour, and still I don't know if they managed to complete the agenda or not (I gave up watching at around 11 p.m.). The meeting was bogged down with circular discussions about matters that should have been addressed quickly and with little fanfare. For example, the ongoing discussion about the apparent need to post Council expense reports on a more frequent basis to ensure transparency.

The current practice is to report out on Council members' expenses on an annual basis. The proposal before Council is to report out at least every six months but preferably quarterly. Staff had indicated that such reporting would require considerable amount of staff time. I would add, with little or any value added.

Considering that Aurora's councillors have the lowest expense budgets in the Region, if media reports are to be believed, and spend only half of what they are allowed to spend in the first place, it begs the question - why is this considered a burning issue for this Council? I don't understand. Unless there is something the general public is not aware of, Council expenses and reporting out of same does not seem to be a significant issue.

For example, I have not seen even one letter to the editor demanding to know on a month by month basis, or quarterly basis, how much councillors spend attending conferences or what have you.

There have been no allegations of misuse, or other kinds of shenanigans. There have been no reports of which I am aware alleging that Council members have done anything wrong; members spend what they are allowed to spend, and expense what they are currently allowed to expense and are apparently quite frugal about it, as one paper reported so why the need to increase the reporting of what amounts to a non-issue? I can think of many better things for Council to be considering than a non-issue such as frequency of reporting expenses.

The multiple debates at the table and elsewhere about the issue are even more curious. Why the need to go round and round (and round!) about this? For heaven's sake, let's move on! Expenses are reported out annually, as per the requirements of the Municipal Act.

Staff has indicated that increased reporting is not required (or warranted) and will actually increase costs to the municipality due to the staff time required to prepare the reports. So it's a non-starter, really. To continue to harp on the need for transparency when there's no evidence to suggest that the current process provides insufficient transparency is to waste Council's and by extension our, time.

Some municipalities report less than Aurora simply stating the aggregate expenses of Council on an annual basis. Other municipalities have real time reporting of expenses on-line, replete with scanned receipts (such as the City of Toronto.) Still others report on a quarterly basis (such as Richmond Hill), but the enhanced reporting comes at a cost either in staff time or software upgrades. And the change in their expense reporting generally followed some kind of scandal (like a councillor expensing golf clubs for example). That is not the case in Aurora.

Do I think some changes need to be made to the method by which expenses are reported? Absolutely.

I think Council should consider revisiting its expense policy in totality. It should work to clarify what can or should be expensed

and what cannot rather than engage in the sensationalizing of one particular expense. Currently, it's all a bit too vague in my opinion.

Personally, I would like to know what events were attended ? and expensed ? by which councillor. A better breakdown of what was spent by whom and on what (i.e. X tickets to X gala, or X charity) would be advantageous. But I think this can be accomplished by expanding on what is reported in the annual report ? not increasing the number of times it is reported.

Transparency of reporting is achieved when relevant information is readily accessible. What matters, therefore, is not how many times you issue a report but what's actually in the report.

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