

CORRIGAN'S CORNER

DOES OUR CITY COUNCIL NEED REFORM?

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Councillor Tranquilli's, "A Discussion Paper to Propose Improvements to Governance in London," served a useful purpose to initiate discussion and to encourage City Council and the public to evaluate the structure of Council. If a review is undertaken, it should be conducted by outside experts and provide for meaningful public participation. It is important that the process be seen as objective. Given the importance of municipal governance in London and the impact of the decision on the 330,000 residents, our decisions require careful deliberation.

The proposal to double the meetings and shorten the timelines for decision making is a concern. If Committee meetings and Council meetings took place in the same week, this would severely restrict the opportunity for input and the notice time for affected parties. If the experience of the past year is to teach us a lesson, it was rushed decision making that was the cause of much of Council's problems. One week allows for public response and reconsideration of Committee decisions. Ways to make our administrative processes more efficient are beneficial but this efficiency must not be at the expense of public participation and democratic debate.

I also respectfully disagree with Councillor Tranquilli's contention, "The only way a [Board of Control] could achieve its maximum effectiveness would be if the recommendations could not be debated by council. Since this is not the case, the current model lacks fundamental effectiveness." Efficiency should not be an absolute priority over public debate and careful consideration by Council. This should be seen as an important function of Council and part of the democratic process where committee recommendations are reviewed and debated and, yes, sometimes defeated. Process of course must not become an excuse for paralysis but due regard must be given to debate and thoughtful reflection and input from the public and this democratic process takes time.

Reducing the representation of each ward to one councillor will certainly limit the debate and alter the representation from each area of the City. Frequently Councillors with different political philosophies and perspectives are elected from the same ward. Debate is healthy for democracy. Any Ward boundary change could also be appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board, creating lengthy delays.

There is no evidence that there will be a cost saving with reducing the number of Councillors if salaries are to be increased to deal with the increased work load. There will also be pressure for full time administrative assistants to deal with the resulting increased volume of work. There also would be costs in realigning ward boundaries and paying for a review of our City governance model.

The increase in work load and time commitment that is proposed in Councillor Tranquilli's paper would effectively preclude many of the current councillors who have outside jobs from sitting on Council. Currently at least 11 of the City Councillors have significant employment responsibilities outside of Council. Careful consideration must be given before we

create a set of conditions which will severely limit the number of people who will be prepared to stand for council positions.

After debate Council decided not to try to rush the process or conclude restructuring process before the end of 2002, which is required to affect change for the November 2003 election. Instead Council proposed to consult the electorate by way of referendum, on various options to be implemented in time for the 2006 election.

Council needs to focus on the tasks at hand and especially upon correcting the errors identified by the KPMG compliance audit. The events of the last few months demonstrate that Council had lost control of the City's governance largely through their own decisions and dependence on senior administration. With the hiring of our new City Manager hopefully we can get back on track. However, the structure of a municipal government is, in itself, not the cause of the failures of elected politicians. Due diligence and proper delegation of responsibility with the appropriate checks and balances is the best way to govern.

We should critically examine our governance model but we must ensure that the result is what London needs as we confront the challenges of the 21st Century.