

Subject: The politics of motions

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8 July 2003

Dear Councillor Crist, Members of Council:

Yet again, we are faced with non-productive discussion about how a motion should - may - arrive on Council's table for discussion and at last I've taken the bait. While recognizing that the District has had its own way - not necessarily the best way - of doing things, it's past time this issue was sorted out once and for all.

Rather than have Mayor Bell persist with the theme of, "This is the way we do it in the District..." Maybe Council should stop and just answer a Dr. Phil-type question, "So, how's it been working for you so far?" The answer taxpayers likely would give is, "Not too darn well, and we're fed up with it, actually."

It goes without saying that most motions will arrive on the table as a matter of course. Staff, in performing the business of the District will present budgets, DVP applications, zoning, and by-law reports and recommendations for Council decisions. It is beyond those day-to-day activities where things begin to go awry and where, increasingly, "politics" rears its ugly head.

Ideally, when a member of Council has a good idea for consideration, or is contacted by one or more citizens on an issue, s/he should be able to file Notice of Motion and have the matter placed on the table for discussion and decision. Every councillor must recognize that this should not be abused and that most motions should follow the regular process.

If an idea has merit, there should be no need at all to "lobby" one's colleagues for support before a topic is allowed to be discussed. [In fact, in the devisive, politically-charged atmosphere which has developed in the District, one is wise to keep one's ideas close to the vest until the last minute!]

Allowing a simple motion, together with a strict 2-minute rationale - with or without a seconder, does not need to waste time. If there's no interest, no support, the motion dies, and the whole thing's over. Do that a few dozen times and the message, one way or another, becomes crystal clear and, whichever way it goes, those voters who care will make the final decision. The community sees one councillor making too many motions which they find unimportant? Out. A majority of council blocking one councillor, or ignoring community concerns? Out. It's a decision for taxpayers to make.

The main benefit of following the above routine, is that an alert citizen will have been made aware of the subject of the proposed motion and, if the issue is of importance to the community, citizens can pick up the ball and run with it. On the flip side, of course, if the proposed motion - or its mover - causes political discomfort, then a reason has to be found to suppress - hence the seconder rule. To be fair, this is not the only council or committee that has the rule; what's less usual is the way in which the District applies it.

What has happened in the District - at least from the sidelines - is that, over the years, some members of Council have been so engrossed with their own political aspirations or image, that they immediately become threatened when another member of Council puts forward an idea, or appears to be gaining significant support in the community.

Leadership should come from the top. A good leader, it is said, strives to make him- or herself redundant by welcoming and encouraging the talents of others. By so doing, s/he usually earns respect and retains the leadership position. That has not happened in the District; quite the opposite. One-upmanship, divisiveness and slate politics developed over the past two terms which, by default, dictated that those who declined to 'play the game' must be diminished in the eyes of the community. The community responded by turning down the re-election bid of several 'slate' incumbents, but still things have not improved.

It was only after the November election that voters were given information which may well have altered a significant number of votes. It was only after the election that most citizens learned that District politicians and bureaucrats alike had left them vulnerable to alleged embezzlement and to the vagaries of a 50-year Ice Arena agreement which, at the time it was written, was known to be illegal.

Faced with such knowledge, is it any wonder that frustration erupts around the Council table and throughout the community - among those who care about how District business is being conducted on their behalf?

In a radio interview, a local psychologist stated: "When an individual feels that s/he is not being listened to or their opinions respected, anger develops - and when anger develops, reason goes out the window."

It is too simplistic to wave a wand and issue a nursery school edict that everyone has to be polite to one another. Respect cannot be

forced; it is earned. So, without rooting out the several causes of frustration in the District, nothing will change - not on council, not among those members of staff who are trying to perform their duties under very difficult circumstances, and certainly not in the community.

In most private corporations, if/when embezzlement occurs, if legal agreements which should have been in place were not, if contract documents were written illegally, or if 'savings accounts' were drained to cover day-to-day operating costs - to make the bottom line look good', then shareholders would look to the CEO for ultimate responsibility and accountability. That happens - and should happen - whether or not the CEO was directly responsible for the problem.

By contrast, what has happened in the District, in a climate facilitated by the flawed, unelected and unaccountable GVRD process, is that the CEO gets to write himself a larger pay cheque.

Whether or not an apathetic public wishes to tolerate higher and higher taxes to have the District remain at the bottom of the heap in management performance, time alone will tell.

There's this much to be said: **The chief responsibility for the success or failure of any democracy lies firmly in the hands of its people - and this ball is in the hands of District citizens. After six-plus years, it has become obvious that little change will occur at District Hall until the people demand it.**

Sincerely,

Liz James
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