

Subject: Fwd: [Bulletin] Local Government Bulletin No. 49, July 2004

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Subject: [Bulletin] Local Government Bulletin No. 49, July 2004

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Local Government Bulletin No. 49, July 2004

The purpose of this bulletin is to focus debate on the need to increase local self-government in <?xml:namespace prefix = st1 ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:smarts" />Canada and to help local communities achieve more autonomy. The Local Government website is: <http://www.localgovernment.ca>

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1. A New City Agenda

A new book by John Sewell, who writes and administers this Local Government Bulletin, has been published this month by Zephyr Press in Toronto. The following outlines the approach taken and a summary glimpse of the issues addressed in the book:

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The challenge for municipal politicians is to begin looking at the city in a new way. Rather than continually portraying the city as the beleaguered level of government without adequate funds to carry out existing programs, local politicians should realize that this level is the most capable of delivering most or many programs that the federal and provincial governments have had responsibility for in the past but have either failed to deliver or refused to fund at adequate levels for city residents.

The position that many city politicians have taken to date is that of a beggar or, more sympathetically, supplicant, in the hope that the powerful forces at senior levels will respond kindly to pleas for help. But it's a truism that those who hold power and authority are loath to give up any of it. Or, as Marshall McLuhan is reputed to have said, "Decentralization can't be done centrally."

Cities must adopt a new strategy. They must define very clearly the programs they know they are capable of delivering and that have popular support, and then to set to work delivering them. The key is doing enough groundwork at the city level so the public understands the need for the programs and supports the city politicians in their push to get the authority and finances for them.

Historically, that's the way change has happened. Toronto, for instance, has been at the forefront of providing affordable housing in Canada. In the late 1940s, a vote of Toronto citizens was the impetus for the first public housing project in Canada, Regent Park North. Once voters had agreed to the redevelopment, the other levels of government signed on to a public housing program that eventually encompassed the rest of the country. In the early 1970s, Toronto embarked on a large-scale non-profit housing program that again was immediately endorsed and expanded by the other levels of government and used extensively across the country. The important thing to recognize here is that it was the initiative of the city itself that galvanized residents and the two levels of government.

That kind of approach must be taken with many of the issues that confront large cities – women, children and social services; public education; immigrant settlement; health; housing; police and security; and so forth. In regard to women and children, for instance, during the past decade provincial and federal governments have shown little interest in addressing the inequality of incomes experienced by women and children. In Ontario, where cities are responsible for administering welfare and child care programs and pay 20 per cent of their costs – and there is considerable concern about poverty – a reasonable course of action would be for cities to first request from the provincial government full independent administrative control of these programs. They should also request control over all current financial contributions from the provincial and federal governments so the monies can be pooled to fund comprehensive programs, and request that these sums be guaranteed for a five-year period, increasing annually according to the cost of living index. Cities should then request from the province full legislative control of welfare and child care and the necessary legislation to achieve this objective. This will allow cities to begin to spend these monies in ways which help lift women and children out of poverty.

Cities should have much more control over issues of health. Many studies (including that by Roy Romanow) have concluded that reform in primary health care is the key to a better and more affordable health care system, yet that is not a change that senior governments seem interested in making, perhaps because it occurs at a community level. A beginning point would be for a city to agree to lead a campaign to double the number of community health centres in the next five years and devise a plan to ensure that such centres serve the majority of city residents. Community health centres are cost effective, focus on prevention, and provide excellent service.

This book advocates that cities begin to develop and implement specific programs because just talking generally about the need for money and power is not a useful strategy. Cities must ask for particular pieces of legislation that allow them to carry out programs they identify as in their mandate, and they must be precise about the monies needed. Not everything advocated in this book can be done at once – city hall will have to set its priorities.

As a city government becomes clear about the powers it should have to improve the quality of life for citizens, and as it takes steps to implement its pursuit of increased authority and effectiveness, momentum will inevitably develop. The challenge is for tough and sustained initiatives, but it is not without considerable hope.

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In a book review in the Toronto Star on July 16, 2004, Carol Goar writes that “Sewell does raise important questions. He puts forward some solid recommendations. Best of all, he gives the embryonic debate about Canada’s urban future a healthy push.”

The book contains short local comments from Cathy Crowe (Toronto), Paul Durber (Ottawa), Bill Phipps (Calgary), Peter Trent (Westmount, Montreal), and Grant Wanzel (Halifax), and there is a foreword by Alan Broadbent.

The full text of the book, which is about 100 pages in length, can be found at <http://www.localgovernment.ca> in the Library section, where it can be downloaded at no cost. A paper copy can be ordered from Zephyr Press, at a cost of \$10.00 plus \$2.50 for shipping and handling, at <http://www.ideasthatmatter.com/cities/>.

2. Taxing problems in Edmonton

In mid July Mayor Bill Smith and the Edmonton city council decided to begin discussions with neighbouring municipalities on the idea of tax sharing. Like other big cities, Edmonton needs more money, and it's looking around for likely sources.

This issue was broached four years ago in a different guise, namely that of a revised governance structure which was canvassed by Lou Hyndman, former minister with the government of Peter Lougheed (see Bulletin No. 4, February 2000.) No changes in either governance or revenue resulted from that Capital Region Governments Review.

Not much of significance has since changed in the last four years. There remain almost two dozen municipalities in the area, and 700,000 of the almost one million residents live in Edmonton. There's a feeling at city council that the city is paying too much and the suburban municipalities not enough. As Mayor Smith's proposal for tax sharing notes, about 74 per cent of the population lives in Edmonton, but the city only gets 69 per cent of the property tax revenue. The city argues that it deserves that extra 5 per cent in that tax revenue, representing \$25 million annually, although others say that preliminary estimate may not stand up to rigorous analysis.

Talking obliquely like this about money raises questions which hardly help the cause. If the discussion goes badly is the city interested in forcible annexations? Edmonton embarked on that course in the 1980s, then abandoned it. This time the city has proposed annexing areas to the south of the city limits with the intention of taking over the airport, among other prizes. Talking annexation is a sure fire strategy for making neighbours nervous rather than cultivating their goodwill.

Is the city wading unawares into a larger discussion of amalgamation to create an even bigger One Big City. That was the device used by provincial governments in Ontario and Quebec in the last decade to hide local financial problems. Already this ogre has raised its head in Edmonton, courtesy the comments of political scientist Jim Lightbody of the University of Alberta, who referred to the municipalities around the city as a "ring of leeches." Raising amalgamation possibilities is a sure fire strategy for making everyone nervous about their status of local democracy.

The root problem, for course, is money. Even in Alberta, where Premier Ralph Klein has announced that the province is finally out of public debt, cities don't have the financial resources they require to deal with the problems their residents expect them to deal with. Tinkering at the edges with tax sharing and its obvious offspring regional government, or with annexation or amalgamation, won't resolve the financial problem. Only new sources of revenues will do that.

In Alberta, as elsewhere in the country, it's a shame that the province, a level of government with excessive powers and revenues – so much money that it is continually reducing its tax revenues - fails to see that it should be shifting the wealth it can't use to local government which desperately need it. Maybe that's the struggle that Edmonton should join directly. It would certainly make its neighbours into allies rather than competitors.

3. Newsletter about homelessness issues

Cathy Crowe, a Toronto street nurse who has gained a country-wide reputation for her work with the homeless, has just started a monthly electronic newsletter about her reflections and experiences about homelessness. The newsletter is distributed free of charge, and can be accessed through the web site of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, <http://www.tdrc.net> where there are instructions about subscribing.

4. Subscribe to the Bulletin

The bulletin is sent monthly, at no cost, to about 1500 individuals involved directly or indirectly in local government in Canada. Those who receive this Bulletin directly (not forwarded by a third party) are already part of the subscription list. Others who wish to subscribe should go to <http://www.localgovernment.ca> and follow the instructions. To unsubscribe, please send a message to info@localgovernment.ca indicating your wish to unsubscribe.

More information about the sponsors of the bulletin, a library of relevant and useful documents, and an archive of past Bulletins, can be found on our web site. We appreciate your comments, your feedback (to j.sewell@on.aibn.com), and items of interest that you wish to share with us and others who visit the web site. Our next Bulletin will be in September.

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