

## BEING ELECTED

### What it's really all about (Part 1)



George B. Cuff

My column in the August issue dealt with the issue of why run ... and why perhaps not to. Given that you are reading this article suggests to me that you did – and you won! Firstly, my congratulations; and secondly, what did you think you were getting yourself into? Let me discuss what it *is not* and *will not* be; and then, what elected life should be, and what your role is.

#### It's Not About You

I begin at the beginning: being elected to a council is like being chosen to play on a hockey team. It is not simply about you. If it was, we would not need the other players. We do (or at least the community does), and the legislation says as much. You are elected to be “one of.” Your teammates were chosen at the same time and most, if not all, will be with you for the duration. They deserve respect, as do you. It would be sad indeed if all felt that they were God’s only gift to the community.

Everyone has a measure of ego: some more, others considerably less. Most elected officials fall into the “more” category. That is not a condemnation: I was one of you for 12 years. My ego served to motivate me to do as well as I could; my ego also served to lure me into situations that were not always in my best interests. Ego can be a guiding influence to what each of you will do, and it can be a factor in inhibiting good judgment and pursuing personal favour.

I am mindful of the fact that most of you campaigned individually, and most will run again as individuals. This requires you to keep an eye on your personal appeal and publicity, and thus on how you vote on controversial issues. It also requires that you live up to your commitment to be a member of a council (including those of you who were elected as mayors) and to work for the betterment of the municipality. The name of your community is not synonymous with your own last name, nor should it be. You are “one of.”

#### It's Not a Sprint

The renowned sprinter Usain Bolt of Jamaica trains extensively for an event that lasts less time than what you may have just spent reading the last paragraph. Even the most famous of today’s sprinters realize that, in order to maintain a competitive advantage, they must spend the time. Your time in office is also like that; if you want it to be the most it can be, be prepared to spend the time. You are in it for four years, and those are precious years. Much of that time will be spent reading documents, attending to the concerns of constituents, attending countless meetings, attending provincial and national conferences, and so on. This schedule will be unlike anything you have experienced before. If you live in a smaller community, you will do all that while still maintaining a full-time job to support your family. Some of you will foolishly

give up holidays to serve your community (and ego) and, at some point, the public will thank you ... as they vote in your replacement.

Do you want to make the most of it? Read on!

#### Public Interest

With a career spent advising municipalities, I am now much nearer the end than the beginning. I am an observer of people and the decisions they make, and have found that some very normal folks do strange things when elected to public office. They begin to feel that the public owes them; that the honoraria being paid is ridiculously low and that accepting some small favours is quite justified. They pad their expenses, even though the dollars involved are small potatoes. They vote on issues for which they know full well they are forbidden to do so under the legislation because of personal involvement. They excuse such behaviour as “everyone knows I own this business and nobody told me

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# Some call it strategic planning ... Whatever the label, the public will be well served if it is led by those who have a real sense of the community's vision and are yet unafraid to invite others to contribute ...

I had to go broke by being on council. I was elected as a smart business person and I plan to keep making deals!"

These types of situations should cause all of us to wince; to feel ashamed of what our colleagues have done. We should think through the basic question: "Would everyone describe this behaviour as being in the public interest?" We are elected to be stewards of the public interest and purse. We are called to a higher calling, not one focused on greed and pettiness.

## Community Vision

One of the principal purposes of being elected is to help your community determine what it wants to be and to help plot a path to get there. While some call it strategic planning or visioning, others call it common sense. Whatever the label, the public will be well served if it is led by those who have a real

sense of the community's vision and who are yet unafraid of inviting other citizens to contribute their own vision to a community-based exercise.

Where do you start? Do not begin by becoming fixated on the details of your administration and their responsibilities. Whenever you see a report from your CAO, ask the question: "Did he/she provide a succinct analysis of the circumstances; were logical options identified; did the report provide useful information or simply too much detail; and finally, was it signed off by council's chief advisor? Then, look at yourselves and ask: "If our management seems to know what they are doing, do we really understand our roles?" Good question! Are you the community leaders or community caretakers? Are you adding value by going through a budget line by line, or do you add value by setting out the big picture and seeing

whether or not the draft budget will help get you there?

I have often wondered: if you as an elected leader are not concerned with the future of your community and what it is doing at present to make that future brighter for all, who is? If you have not identified the larger issues and some possible ways by which they could be tackled, who will? If you have decent management, why do their jobs? This is just a question, but it's a useful place to start. Do not be put off by the experienced folks who decry any attempt at changing council's age-old patterns of micro-management. Be a leader. Make the folks who voted for you confident that they made the right choice. **MW**

**Next Month:** Is that all? No, but it's a start. I will describe other aspects of being elected that I think are critical to your success.

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