

# Delegation on Advisory Committee Review (Item 4.5, CL-17-20)

Roland Tanner

I'm delegating today on the Advisory Committee Review process, and the recommendations being made by the City Clerk.

Although I was part of the citizen committee that drafted recommendations that informed this report, I am delegating as an individual. These are my opinions only, and I am going to state things in much stronger terms than they would. But I put too much into this not to have my say.

The whole committee considered delegating, but, without sharing reasons which are not mine to share, it would be fair to say there was doubt expressed as whether there was any point. If the implications of that statement don't embarrass every person working at City Hall, I don't know what will.

I am also not here to criticize council, or any member of council. Council has had little opportunity to assess the recommendations the citizen committee provided apart from what can only be described as a farcical workshop that insulted us all.

I am not here to criticize the city clerk, or any single member of staff. The city clerk has come into this process late, and on looking at the mess he'd inherited took the traditional government solution of punting the whole thing into the long grass.

I am not even here to defend the recommendations made by the committee that I took part in, although I think they are good. I am definitely not here because I think council is obligated to do what we say. You're not, and you have the votes to prove it.

I'm here to do two things. First I will point out what Burlington does when it asks citizens for so-called advice. Secondly I am going to point out just how indefensible the status quo is, and has been for decades.

Year after year, citizens have been invited to take part in committees and task forces and reports. Year after year the hard work of those committees is shelved. It has to stop.

Please. Don't ask people to take part in any more reports that are consigned to dusty shelves for consideration 'as we go forward'. Sitting beside the Shape Burlington Report from 2009. And

the Inclusive Cities Canada Civic Panel from 2005. And the Community-Based Government Committee of 1997.

Twenty-three years and counting, just on the subject of advisory committees. Twenty-three years, and hardly any change. Who remembers the Engagement Charter? When was the last time it was mentioned in a council document? What about all the other recommendations in the Shape Burlington Report? What change is actually being proposed today? Seriously? I'm asking because I don't know. The report speaks of an incremental approach. What increment? What's different?

Any changes adopted at City Hall are too little, too late to stem the tides of cynicism and distrust that form the public view of local government. This systematic institutional inability to achieve even modest change does huge damage to local democracy and the council-members who are the public faces of it.

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But **what was** the consensus from those consulted about advisory committees? For 23 years, what has every citizen-based report about advisory committees shared? What is obvious from the public meetings and questionnaires submitted by the public, advisory committees and city hall staff that went into this report?

**That of all possible decisions that might be made about advisory committees, the status quo was only one that nearly everybody agreed was unacceptable.**

Listen to just one staff liaison comment:

*I have seen older members dominate .... newer members. Those newer members have in several cases become discouraged and left the committee. I have seen committee members speak abusively towards staff ... I have experienced difficulty tracking how the committee has spent the budget that Council allocated them for multi-year projects. ... I have seen a committee chair's spouse get involved in committee business, publicly misrepresent [their] connection to the committee, use committee materials that [they] obtained from the chair's personal computer and bring legal risk to the committee (all the while defaming the reputation of the committee vice-chair).*

There's much more in that single account that I urge you to seek out, because it speaks to a committee that was taken over by a special interest with the express intent of undermining that committee's stated purpose.

How can such a situation arise? Largely, because of the way advisory committees are currently

selected. Volunteers are interviewed to find the most appropriate members. Appropriate being defined how? Nobody knows, but one criteria always mentioned is expertise.

A member of a Heritage committee might own a heritage house. A member of a cycling committee is probably a keen cyclist. A retired planner. A retired manager. I have friends on the cycling and heritage committees, but their very depth of involvement brings inherent bias. The advice of a committee of activists is of no value to use as a barometer of the city. Such committees reflect only themselves. They are pressure groups. They cannot give you the unbiased or sound advice you need and our community deserves.

Activists have to operate - and operate best - outside city hall - like Burlington Green, or ECoB, or BFAST, or any number of others. What *you* need is a sense of the views of the *whole* community.

And we know there are often not enough volunteers for committees, so staff and council members hunt for likely candidates. They will make a quiet suggestion to a friend, a well-known volunteer, a 'good guy' who can be trusted. I know; I've been asked to apply for committees multiple times. That's how the system works.

One effect of this is that city halls across Canada turn to the same one or two visible minority residents to sit on multiple committees. Diversity representation is reduced to one or two non-white voices in a city of hundreds of thousands.

And worst of all, the committees are dominated by the most privileged voices in society. Overwhelmingly middle class, middle aged and senior, white, wealthy and male. So the advice reflects wealthier, whiter and maler priorities. There is simply no defence any more.

And I do acknowledge the hard work of many committee members. Yet the good work that happens has little to no impact on anything the city does, and is discredited by the dysfunctional committees that frankly deserve to be ignored.

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This council was elected with a mandate and expectation of change. Advisory committees should be low-hanging fruit, not an impossible nut to crack. We all know the wheels of government turn incredibly slowly, but you should all be furious that we've wasted two years getting nowhere. To continue with the status quo is an embarrassment.

I'll conclude with this. Two people got paid in this process. The two IAP2 consultants - so-called experts in public participation - who came in from BC and Oakville, wasted your time and ours, and undermined everything our committee of residents had done. Can you

spot the irony of that?

But Richard Delaney of Delaney and Associates suggested we just abolish advisory committees and replace them 100% with task forces. Did he think we hadn't thought of that? We did. At length. But maybe we know enough about Burlington to know that that wasn't a good idea and would throw away the benefits a functional advisory system would bring.

But you know what? Why not do it? You could not have a worse situation that you have now, and you will avoid wasting any more of the time of good people who pour hard work and optimism into these advisory committees.

Thank you.