

Delegation to Corporate Services committee re: Report F-04-21-1

Mayor, Councillors. I wish to delegate as a private citizen of Burlington. My opinions are mine alone though I believe I speak on behalf of others who are concerned with both the process the City has put before the public on the proposed city Budget, and specific items as noted in the Budget Action Request Forms.

I watched the Council proceedings over the Capital Budget hoping to hear Councillors discuss various items within the proposed budget only to discover that, basically, anything that wasn't discussed essentially meant that no one had objections and therefore met with approval. I listened as Councillors turned to discuss (for some four plus hours) various items on a list of items known as Budget Action Request Forms – items that up until shortly before that point were not revealed to the public.

Let's move on to the proposed Operating Budget. Again, it appears that Council will not be going through the proposal, line by line to seek out efficiencies or perhaps to respond to questions from the public. We seem to be here today to discuss another list of personal items in a Budget Action Request Form.

There's no background to explain why different Councillors have proposed, or supported, what is presented. I see this as a huge flaw for anyone in the public, like myself, wanting to understand how our taxpaying dollars are spent, how decisions are made, how priorities are set.

City staff are asked to write up a list of items, with expected costs, Councillors review a large and complex budget list, ask a few questions, a window of opportunity is opened for public viewing, Councillors either because of public feedback or personal choices make a few recommendations and then vote to accept the final version. It's the system that's been used for years and years and it appears as if this is the only way city budgets can be created.

I am not here to blame anyone – Council, city staff, or whomever, for the existing system. We, as a society have inherited this format which harkens back to the days when only land-owning men made all the decisions.

So I've come to this committee to ask – Is this the only way this process can be made? Is the process transparent, fair, and treated with equity for all residents? I might also add, does it have a built-in resilience to withstand new and demanding challenges we might face – such as the coronavirus pandemic, or climate change, or changes in senior government policy?

Now I know it's too late to change this year's budget process, but I want you to think about building a more inclusive process that involves true engagement by citizens, not stakeholders, not lobbyists, not competing City departments, not personal wish lists from Councillors.

I want you to consider a community-building exercise that has been used successfully in countless numbers around the world – Citizens' Assemblies.

Judging by a growing demand for more transparency, education, and participatory democracy, not just in Halton but in cities, regions, nations around the world, it's becoming apparent that our system of government interaction with its constituents requires much more than an election every four years.

I think this Council got a taste of what lies ahead at last week's Regional Council meeting when a number of delegates supported the motion to extend the public consultation process around the Region's Official Plan. The public is hungry for more information. How and why are these decisions being made on their behalf?

Briefly, a Citizens' Assembly is a randomly selected group of citizens from across the city – east/west, rural/urban, chosen with respect to cultural diversity, inter-generational and other demographics. After a period of educational sessions by experts (in this case including City Staff representing their departments) the group is then asked to discuss various elements of the issue they are tasked with addressing (again in this case – the budget), and then come to a consensus of what should take priority, what is necessary, what is needed, what is 'nice-to-have'. The results are given to Council so that they can make their decisions based on a true representation of community desires.

This requires a significant change in thinking about the kind of public engagement we've experienced thus far to mixed results and dissatisfaction. That is why I've come to you today, while the Budget is top of mind, to give you the opportunity to consider this shift in direction over the next year.

In the few minutes I have remaining, let me explain how I came to this point.

In the BAR Form, item 3, Free Transit for Seniors, I see the names of the Mayor and Councillors Nisan, Bentivegna, Galbraith, and Sharman, and beside that a proposed cut of \$116,700. Am I to believe that these people are against Free Transit for Seniors all together? Or are they against continuing the pilot project – interrupted by COVID? And if they did not recommend this cut, who did – City Staff, staff from another department, the Clerk? The BAR Form doesn't tell me.

Let me further explain, if I were chosen to sit on a Citizens' Assembly, how I would approach this item.

The purpose of the pilot was to shift senior ridership from peak times allowing more people, who may be commuting to work, to take transit – a benefit. If more people take transit, there will be fewer cars on the roads – a benefit. Fewer cars means less congestion – a benefit. Fewer cars means less wear and tear on the roads, and less road maintenance – a benefit. Less traffic means cleaner air and fewer respiratory admissions to the hospital – benefit and benefit.

On the negative side of the equation – a perceived cost in lost revenue. The buses are running all day anyway so I don't quite get where the \$116,700 figure comes from.

If you're going to do a cost benefit analysis – make sure you include all the social, health and environmental benefits. And don't forget all the negative impacts if you don't take action.

This approach could just as easily be applied to that other destructive force in our lives – the coronavirus pandemic. What are the social, mental, health-related and yes, environmental impacts of this major challenge? How can we apply a pandemic lens to our everyday lives? I know you're trying but not through this budget process. COVID and climate change are disconnected from today's budget discussions.

Another item that caught my attention is the removal of three Full Time positions in the Forestry department after Council's big announcement regarding a Private Tree By-Law (which seems to be a revenue generator for the City, if I'm reading the figures correctly).

If these three staff are not hired, for jobs not related to the Private Tree By-Law, then who will look after this project while the entire department deals with over 2,000 incomplete work orders. And how underfunded is this department that such a backlog can accrue?

I could go on about Leaf pick-up or snow clearing of roads and sidewalks, or a salary increase for Council, but I'm here to talk about the process.

I get it. It's tough to get the public engaged in 436 pages of Budget but when Council cherry-picks its pet projects, or fights amongst each other to dominate the discussion – it serves no one.

When you spend millions of dollars to beautify the main lobby of City Hall; when you create a Green Initiatives Reserve Fund but don't put any money into it; when you quibble about cutting \$10,000 from Advisory Committee budgets – out of an Operating Budget of \$183 million – I have to ask, 'What priorities does this Council have?'

Rather than promote the opt-out model, the cut-this, cut-that, budget method, perhaps it would be better to build from the ground up and ask your fellow citizens what they see as priorities. No doubt some of us might be disappointed at some choices but at least we would know what those around us feel is important to their well-being, what they need to ensure the safe growth of family and nature, what they feel we need to build as a community, and how we want to treat our neighbours.

Please, find a way to better explain to the citizens of Burlington what, and why decisions are being made with taxpayers footing the bill of over \$183 million. Please find a better way to get the public involved in the process. Please consider a Citizens' Assembly approach to next year's Budget. And please don't mistake the lack of delegations to budget meetings as a sign of acceptance. It just might mean the process is lacking.

I'm reminded of Doug Ford's refusal to allow municipal governments to change the way we vote to allow for Ranked Ballots. "It's the way we've voted since 1867," he explained.

Well maybe it's time for things to change. Maybe it's time for cities to find a new way to deal with big ticket items and large issues and community engagement. Perhaps Burlington could be a leader in this new way of thinking instead of being behind the times.