Facts for the NK Election

By Mark Wright, North Kawartha

Getting the facts during an election campaign can be challenging. Candidates want to paint themselves in the best possible light, so any acknowledgement of problems or shortcomings are rare. I wanted to present a few of the facts I have dug up over the last few months, and compare these facts to the promises and claims that were made during the 2014 campaign.

Let's start with the pledge to "regulate and control in-water development". Taking responsibility for in-water construction, while popular with Rick Woodcock's CLPOA support base, has been an expensive experiment for the taxpayers of our township. Despite the mayor's now-ironic 2014 promise to "limit expensive OMB appeals", our current council has been dragged into 13 such hearings over the past four years. Six of these appeals stem from council's over-ambitious and ill-advised attempt to regulate in-water structures, AKA the dock bylaw. As a result, by May of this year our current council had already spent over $513,000.00 to cover fees for lawyers and outside planners.

These paid experts provide advice on how to write new regulations, as well as representing the township at the many Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) proceedings North Kawartha has been involved in since 2014. With more than half of these legal appeals still unresolved (including the in-water regulations appeal), and realizing that this council still has four months left in their term, the final figure is likely to approach $600,000 by December. By comparison, our previous council spent less than $300,000 on legal and planning during their four-year term. This means that these expenses will have more than doubled under Rick Woodcock's leadership. Given this track record, we can reasonably expect that our tax dollars will continue to be spent on defending poor planning decisions if the status quo council is re-elected.

A promise of zero tax increases was replaced by four consecutive tax increases over four years. A promise to "improve pedestrian safety on Burleigh Street" was put on the back burner, and has now been recycled into his current campaign literature. A promise of community policing programs resulted in the dissolution of North Kawartha's Community Policing Committee. His promise to limit closed-door decisions also faded with astonishing speed. In the first year of Rick Woodcock's term, 57 meetings were held with 30 of those having closed sessions.

In 2018, our open and responsive mayor has chaired 16 meetings (as of July 17th), nine of which included closed sessions. That means over half of our council meetings this year have been held partly or completely behind closed doors. This pattern is particularly distasteful given the way our mayor used vague insinuations of secrecy against our previous council during his 2014 election campaign. It is also interesting to note that our previous Councils were able to conduct the business of the municipality with less than 30 regular meetings a year, held far fewer closed sessions, maintained one of the lowest tax rates in Peterborough County and still left behind an outstanding legacy of new and redeveloped Township infrastructure that we all enjoy today.

Let's make sure we know what we're getting when we vote this fall!

Editor's Notes: In his submission, Mr. Wright has introduced a long list of issues. In fairness, here are some points to put a bit more context on these issues.

On the issue of the extra costs related to legal and planning expenses, it is certainly clear that no breakdown is available to show the exact split between legal/planning expenses on Burleigh Bay vs. the new dock bylaw. Certainly, the number of appeals and issues are related to decisions made by the current council and to amendments passed by previous and current councils. The Burleigh Bay issue has been brewing for the past 15 years and it came to a head during the past four years. In the court's original decision on the dock bylaw, the judge said this should have been handled by the previous council. So, the current council was faced with making a brand new "in-water development" by-law and over time, everyone is gaining experience on how well it meets the council's goals to serve the community.

On the issue of "zero tax increase", it seems that the current council had to handle a significant increase +70% in legal/planning fees. In addition, council was faced with an 80% increase in OPP costs and other significant projects which included the Clydesdale/Jeff road project, Township Office Re-Org and Fire Department Revitalization. Despite this, council is proud that they have held their tax increase in the bottom 25% when compared to other municipalities in the county.

On the issue of Burleigh Street safety, there is no information available to show that there is any delay to this project, so it appears to be proceeding as scheduled. On the issue of Community Policing Committed dissolved, apparently this project was shelved after two years of unsuccessful attempts to develop public interest getting new volunteers to run this committee. Does anyone want to volunteer? Contact your councillor.

On the issue of the increase in the number of closed-door meetings, the council has to follow strict and long-established guidelines to determine which items must or must-not be handled in closed-door sessions. Also, these sessions can be requested by various sources including staff, legal counsel, the chief building inspector and any member of council. Nobody can just choose to deal with a particular issue in a closed-door session. It must meet the criteria and when it does, then it's a closed-door meeting.

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