

# Careful what you ask for when lower taxes are promised to win elections

*More to the Story*

By Ben Bennett

The Ghosts of Candidates Past and Decisions Past are hanging in the air over our municipal election next month.

With the door now closed for new entrants to the city hall arena, the list of hopefuls contains many past councillors as well as some past provincial and federal candidates.

We say goodbye to Glora Kovach, Lise Burcher, Jim Furfaro and Ian Findlay, but we also may say hello again to Cathy Downer, Mike Salisbury, Christine Billings and Ray Ferraro, and to those who go back far enough, to Gary Walton, too.

Among the last minute sign-ups were a couple of previous Progressive Conservative candidates, Greg Shirk and Bob Sennechal, who join previous NDP candidates Phil Allt and James Gordon on the hustings, albeit in different wards.

The late filing of the two Tories and Ms. Billings' 11<sup>th</sup> hour decision to run added some energy to the theory that we are seeing the cobbling together of a slate to support a right wing mayoral bid, as we did in 2003.

Given the hammering the Tories have taken in the past provincial and federal elections in Guelph, not to mention the mess over the robocalls business, the troops could use some good news.

I don't however, see this as an official PC conspiracy so much as a general right-of-centre push by those special interest groups that pulled the strings of the "tax-fighting" council that ran the city from 2003 to 2006. (And the timing of full-page ads by local developers complaining about how hard done by they are has added some energy to *that* theory.)

That council was all about cutting taxes and saving money. It turned out that to talk about it is one thing, but to do it is another.

While the mostly right wing councillors around the table did ensure Wal-mart got to open its doors, and were even there as greeters when it finally did, it also made a few decisions aimed at reducing costs that have actually cost us millions.

The first thing they did was cancel plans for a new city hall, only to realize shortly afterwards, that, oops, we do need more space. As a result, new tenders went out and a \$20-odd million project became a \$30-odd million project.

The decision not to buy the old post office which would have been perfect for a new library development ended up costing us millions in renovations costs. Because of existing shared cost agreements with the county, which bought it to house the social services department, we paid to fix up a building for offices that could have been a major downtown draw. And we are still without a new library.

As it turned out, the taxes went up more in those three years than in the past two terms of council. I am not naming names here because it is not important. And I am not suggesting for a moment these folks were not trying to keep costs down; it's just not that easy.

A lot of things that affect the finances at the local level happen outside of the community. Whether it is a global economic meltdown or a federal or provincial policy to download services, the impacts all get dumped on the municipal taxpayer at some point. There is not much a council can do to change that.

Those candidates who have served on council in the past will know that and I hope they have the integrity to be honest about municipal finances rather than pander to the oft-used sales pitch that a painless lower tax future is possible.

All councils, whatever their stripe, make good decisions and, in retrospect, sometimes, bad decisions. We've had some of both during the past term and no doubt we'll see both in the coming four years. All we can ask is that they do their homework and do their best with the information they have, rather than play the penny-wise, pound-foolish Scrooge card on some kind of ideological principle.

Everyone would like to be able to cut taxes without cutting services but it really isn't as easy as some folks would have you believe.

If it were, more people would do it and they would be shining examples to us all.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at [www.bbc.guelph.org](http://www.bbc.guelph.org).)