

Feeling frozen out of the city council process – literally.

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

Over the years I have spent thousands of hours in different council chambers across this province of ours – as a delegate, a concerned citizen or a reporter, but never as a councillor.

While the idea of my running for a seat on the horseshoe has come up a few times in my mind, and in the minds of some of my friends (God bless them), I am now fully resolved that it will never happen.

The workload of a councillor is daunting, a lot of it is frankly very boring, and the number of positive comments you get are far outnumbered by the grumblings of the discontented.

So I tip my hat to anyone that steps forward to run and I have great respect for anyone that takes a council seat, particularly those who have been there before and know what they are in for.

Having spent the better part of four hours in the Guelph council chamber recently, listening to a whole raft of citizens speaking on the Niska bridge issue, my resolve is just as strong but I am left with serious concerns about the value of this so-called public process we have.

While some speakers were concerned about the heritage loss of replacing the bridge, most seemed more worried about the surrounding land and the prospect of increased traffic.

Despite statements from the staff that turning a one-lane bridge into a modern two-lane affair would not lead to an increase in vehicles, no one on our side of the security barrier seemed comforted.

And suggestions from the mayor that the new structure could be made to look like an old-fashioned covered bridge and become a major attraction were a/. unconvincing (he is not really known for his love of “frills” at budget time) and b/. not exactly reassuring given that increased traffic is an issue.

Faith in the system had already been eroded by the last-minute letter from our legal department warning council about the liability implications of not showing “due care” in its approach to the issue, and concern that the process itself has been full of what auditors like to call “irregularities.”

We are not privy to the inside workings of city hall, and clearly the council members were made aware of information or arguments from the staff that were persuasive enough to lead to a 9-4 decision to build the two-lane bridge, with some added motions that may address at least some of the heritage concerns.

Perhaps we will learn more about measures to assuage the fears about increased car and truck traffic and how much collateral environmental damage to the immediate area we might expect.

Perhaps we will see more evidence that confirms staff's insistence that the bridge could not be repaired or replaced with a single-lane bridge.

Perhaps we'll learn more about why closing the road was not really considered, at least not publicly.

Knowing most of the good folks that sit around that horseshoe, I am sure that they felt the decision they made was a sound one based on what they knew.

But I really think the council should swap places and enjoy the gallery experience for one night – including the absurdly over-zealous air-conditioning that is making delegate and audience participation as uncomfortable physically as it is becoming frustrating mentally.

Many of those attending were likely at their first council meeting and/or making their first public presentation.

If, like me, they left after the public had done its part (and become frozen to the gills), they would have had some confidence that some very powerful arguments against the staff recommendation had been made, arguments that warranted further study, research and analysis.

Instead, they picked up the paper the next day to find the decision had been made and wasn't even close.

Given the lateness of the hour, we cannot blame the paper for not reflecting the rationale behind the decision (if it was even revealed), but you could understand if people's faith in the system was diminished at best, and demolished at worst.

And that's the point.

If we want more people to participate in the council decision process we need them to feel confident that they are getting the whole story.

And lastly, turn off the damn air conditioning. It's winter, for heaven's sake!

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)

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