

The dishonest statements since the Urbacon decision are the most troubling

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

The best thing that can be said about the Urbacon affair is that no one is looking very good.

Unlike others, I am not sure pointing fingers to the past is very productive. I have no doubt that Mayor Kate Quarrie and her team thought they had a good contract for construction of the new city hall. I have no doubt that Mayor Karen Farbridge and *her* team gave great consideration to the matter before dismissing the contractor when problems arose, getting into a potential legal battle as a result.

To my mind, the troubling part came after the court decision last month that found that the contractor was unjustly fired. We've seen dishonesty from city hall and dishonesty from politicians.

Councillor and mayoral candidate Cam Guthrie merely added to the impression that he is an opportunist and headline grabber when he publically criticized the mayor for her part in this before the notice from the court had barely hit the doormat.

The official statement from the City rightly pointed out that it needed to see the reasons before commenting, but then it did exactly that by putting words in the judge's mouth about how it only had taxpayers' best interests at heart. The judge said nothing of the kind, as this newspaper has pointed out. I don't know if this was supposed to address Mr. Guthrie's accusations, but it was wrong, it was unprofessional and frankly rather bush league.

And this occurred just a few weeks after city hall put words in the Province's mouth when it decided not to examine the city's books. That decision, a "waste of money" in a city hall statement but not, as suggested, the provincial position, was in response to calls for an audit from a local clique of supposed tax crusaders. That a few disgruntled citizens masquerading as a movement could cause grief for the local bureaucracy may be discomfiting, but does not excuse for a moment what is effectively dishonesty under a city hall letterhead. That it happened once was unfortunate but perhaps forgivable, but for it to happen twice in a few weeks tells me that whoever at city hall signed off those statements needs to go before the city's reputation does.

There is no mitigation for Mr. Guthrie's statements, which were pure politics. If there were any doubt about that then his attempts to link the current mayor with the

“unnecessary battle” with Wal-Mart confirm it. That was either pure dishonesty or Mr. Guthrie isn’t doing his homework.

The battle was actually initiated by Wal-Mart (and Zellers) in 1997 when council’s decision to uphold its Official Plan was appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board. The City had to respond; it had no choice. Joe Young was mayor then, by the way.

The City, did however, have a choice when a new council under Ms Quarrie changed sides on the big box issue a few years later. Some councillors argued at the May 25, 2004 council meeting that Wal-Mart’s developers would be more than capable of fighting the citizens’ group still supporting the city’s plan at the OMB. There was no need for taxpayers to pay for a city lawyer to be there. They were outvoted 9 -4. Voting in favour of the City spending tax dollars on legal and consulting services were Mayor Quarrie, councillors Baily, Billings, Birtwistle, Ferraro, Furfaro, Hamtak, Moziar, and Schnurr. Opposing the motion were councillors Burcher, Downer, Kovach and Laidlaw. Approximately \$250,000 was spent on legal fees for the OMB hearing in 2004.

During the 2005 budget process, it was proposed that a further \$50,000 be set aside to pay for a city lawyer to support Wal-Mart’s side in the citizens’ group’s appeal of the OMB decision.

In a year where major service cuts were needed to bring in a budget that still increased taxes 5.5%, arguments were again made that there was no need for taxpayers to support lawyers of the stature that Wal-Mart would be retaining. The \$50,000 was approved, with the same councillors approving the expenditure. (Trust me on this one; I was there.)

So, to use Mr. Guthrie’s words, it did indeed “cost the taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars”, but Ms Farbridge had nothing to do with it and those responsible were tossed out at the next election.

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