

NORTH VAN CITY VOICES

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Gaming and 'Back room deals' aka 'Hardball Politics'

Last night during the Policy Committee Meeting at Council, there were some interesting revelations as well as many contradictory statements. Such as:

- that Playtime Gaming (the proponent) had provided paid staff to work on the Mayor's slate 'phone bank' pushing 'like minded' Mayor and Council candidates during the November civic election
- that the proponent had discussed using Lot 5 in the Shipyards but Roger Brooks didn't seem to support it
- that the proponent may have considered placing the 'gaming facility' at Harbourside but changed their minds
- that the proponent believed that the Squamish Nation was not interested, however the BC Lottery Corp said they continue to have discussions.

Chairman Rod Clark wrapped up the meeting and brought up 'Hardball Politics' – never in his knowledge has there been a hardball political organization funding four Council members with a phone bank (in-kind) donation. He also expressed concern that 'somehow' this may end up with having to be placed on Lot 5 in the future.

Councillor Bookham spoke with concern and passion about this process. Given that discussions had continued with the Mayor during the campaign, why was this not a campaign issue? Why the code of silence? She believes that this should have been a ballot question in November in order to gauge the level of support in the community. She likened BCLC's choosing of the proponent almost feudal in the way a territory has been identified and a particular company given the opportunity – there is nothing fair or transparent about it. She said that this proposal did not pass the smell test.

One speaker stated that this policy change would be a monumental shift of cultural and social change. He believes, given the voter turnout in November, that Council members have no mandate to make this decision.

We requested the wording of the passed motion from the City Clerk but the 'wording has not yet been finalized'. The Mayor said that he wanted more information. We would also like more information. With all the other priorities in the City, why is this before Council five months after the election when there was not a whisper during the campaign. What's wrong with this picture?

Fred Dawkins spoke at the meeting last night, and has written the following Editorial:

I want to respond to a couple of the arguments raised by Mayor Mussatto and members of his council slate at last night's Policy Committee discussion on gaming.

The mayor all but called those opposed to a North Shore casino hypocrites for accepting the revenue generated by gambling in other municipalities while speaking against it here. To that I say, we were never asked whether we supported the BC government's ongoing expansion of gambling. We didn't get to vote in Richmond when the issue came up there, or in Burnaby, or anywhere else. We only get to say what happens in our own community. Personally, if I had been given a vote on whether to allow casinos anywhere in BC, knowing what I know now I probably would have voted no. This is not a NIMBY issue, and I object to that characterization.

The mayor and Councilors Buchanan and Back also made a big deal of how so many local charities benefit from government grants generated by gambling revenue. To me, this is simply an example of political expediency on the part of the BC government. Stop the flow of gambling revenue and that grant money could just as easily come from higher taxes, or appealing to the community for voluntary giving. Of course, the provincial government is deathly afraid of incurring the wrath of taxpayers – it's easier and safer to take the money from gamblers (and other "hidden" sources such as Crown corporations) instead.

The work that these charities do is admirable, and I assume it's much needed. But the biggest reason it's needed is that the provincial government refuses to foot the bill themselves for necessary social services. After years of budget cuts the "social safety net" has been partly offloaded onto community charities. Once upon a time, charities handled their own fundraising; now they are increasingly dependent on gambling revenue doled out by government. Is that healthy? To me, no.

Finally, I thought the howls of wounded virtue over Councilor Bookham's comments about campaign donations were a bit rich. The mayor and his slate have no one but themselves to blame for the cynicism caused by accepting campaign funding from companies – including Playtime in this case – who stand to benefit financially from the votes of those same representatives. To Councilor Keating's comment that accepting those donations is perfectly legal – that's not the issue and never has been. Lots of

things that are unethical are not illegal; this is one example. And accepting money from rent-seekers is indeed illegal at higher levels of government, for the very good reason that it erodes public trust in the process. It doesn't matter whether all the players in this game are acting totally honestly — the problem is, there's no way for the public to know whether they are. It's impossible not to suspect back room deals. That's corrosive to democracy.

The level of cynicism I hear from people in the community over the campaign funding issue is quite disturbing. "They're all corrupt," is a common comment I hear. The fact that it's not disturbing to the Mayor and his slate reflects badly on them, not on Councilor Bookham.

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