

Municipalities cool to auditor-general

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 26, 2011

The province's plan to create a municipal auditor-general's office is being rushed and municipalities have serious concerns about its worth, the president of the Union of B.C. Municipalities said Thursday.

As a result, the UBCM is holding a special session at its annual convention next month in Vancouver to try to convince the province to hold off until more questions can be answered, said Barbara Steele.

"We don't know what the problem is that they are trying to solve with a municipal auditor-general," Steele said. "We would like an understanding of what they want to achieve from this office. We're in the dark here."

On July 22, the UBCM met with Community, Sport and Cultural Development Minister Ida Chong to raise concerns about the plan, which would see the creation of a new auditor-general's office similar to ones at the provincial and federal level.

But the two sides failed to resolve differences over the plan, and the UBCM subsequently issued a "context paper" questioning the need for a municipal auditor-general. It noted that such agencies only exist in Nova Scotia, in Quebec for cities over 100,000, and the city of Toronto.

Chong has given local governments until Sept. 9 to complete a survey about how a municipal auditor-general might affect them. But Steele said the UBCM was excluded from the survey and all the union's efforts to slow down the plan have been ignored.

With the government expecting to bring in legislation in October, a mere week after the UBCM convention, there is little room for meaningful consultation, she said.

Premier Christy Clark first raised the idea of a municipal auditor-general during her campaign for the leadership of the B.C. Liberals.

On Wednesday, Chong told The Vancouver Sun she expects the new auditor-general to be hired by next year. She said the provincial and federal governments both benefit from auditors-general and she thinks municipalities can, too.

"At the municipal level, there would be some merit to having an auditor-general to have a look at the expenditures, just as we do at the provincial and federal levels," she said.

"We have seen that the federal and provincial auditors-general have been able to selectively choose various audits that shed a light, or even a spotlight, on where spending is effective or efficient."

Under the proposed program, the auditor-general's office would first be funded by the province, but local governments could be expected to assume the costs if the program proves a success, she said.

Vancouver Coun. Raymond Louie, chairman of the city's finance committee, said city council won't meet before the government deadline and has had no chance to ask staff for a report or recommendations.

But the idea has received an enthusiastic thumbs-up from Vancouver Coun. Suzanne Anton, a Non-Partisan Association mayoral candidate in the Nov. 20 election. She said a municipal auditor-general would have his or her hands full in Vancouver looking into what she felt were questionable decisions by Mayor Gregor Robertson's Vision Vancouver-led council

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