

# Taking an unbiased look at municipal books is a good idea

BY SHACHI KURL, SPECIAL TO THE SUN AUGUST 22, 2011

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Municipal Auditor-general. On their own or strung together, they're words that would send even politically engaged voters to dreamland. But the debate raging over Premier Christy Clark's commitment to appoint one ought to wake you up - because it's your wallet at stake.

Having an independent professional take a hard look at local books isn't an idea borne out of the blue. For years, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business has been one of several organizations in B.C. begging local governments for more transparency and a better explanation of how your tax dollars are being spent.

We believe it's a fair question, given the rate of operating spending at the municipal level now outpaces that of growth and inflation by nearly 100 per cent. We think it's fair, considering municipalities are squeezing business owners for property taxes nearly three times what residential owners pay.

The municipal political establishment doesn't agree. Confronted by our and others' questions, many mayors and councillors either shrug their shoulders, claim poverty at the hands of stingy provincial and federal governments, or lecture us about the difficulties of budgeting. It's all a little bit rich, because families and small business owners know exactly how hard it is to set, manage and stick to budgets. It rarely happens without the kind of honest discussions and pain local politicians seeking re-election are keen to

avoid.

While the Union of BC Municipalities remains unable or unwilling to grasp the problem, taxpayers understand too well. It's not enough for cities to assure us the city chequebook is being balanced at the end of the month; voters deserve to know what those cheques are being written for, and whether those expenses represent good value.

A municipal auditor-general could answer those questions where municipalities themselves can't or won't, through performance audits. We know the value these watchdogs can provide. We've seen Auditor-general John Doyle hold the provincial government's feet to the fire. We've watched Sheila Fraser do the same in Ottawa. Why shouldn't municipalities be under the same kind of scrutiny?

The municipal establishment will tell you appointing and properly funding an auditor-general office is an expensive venture that may not be worth the money. We say audits are money well spent, and the auditor's scope could start small. What's wrong with having an office that carries out a handful of performance audits each year, picking a couple of small, medium-sized and large communities; perhaps a regional district in some years, and focusing on accountability and value for dollars?

Some municipal leaders may argue such audits should instead be done by the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development, which is responsible for local government in B.C. We say a municipal auditor-general must be an independent, armslength officer, answerable only to the legislature, and therefore to B.C. voters themselves. A watchdog, without claws or fangs, is a lapdog. One housed inside government is subject to government's changing priorities.

Independence also ensures the results of audits will be publicly reported so local media have quick and easy access to findings, and taxpayers can make their own judgments about the state of municipal spending.

There are upsides for the municipalities too, through the sharing of best practices identified by an auditor-general. Report cards aren't just about red-circling what's wrong, but highlighting what's right. And there's even a chance municipal auditor-general report cards may bear out the funding argument: if local governments aren't getting their fair share, the spotlight would shine on those deficiencies.

We vote for our mayors and councils on November 19th. It's a good time for you to be asking whether your local candidate supports greater fiscal scrutiny, transparency and accountability; an even better time for you to think about whether they really deserve your vote, if they don't.

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