

# Trimming fat won't come without pain

BY ELIZABETH JAMES, SPECIAL TO NORTH SHORE NEWS    AUGUST 10, 2011

"(Toronto) City councillors woke up to find themselves doing the same thing as the day before and the day before that: examining a list of proposed cutbacks and then listening to a procession of interest groups explain why those cuts would be a disaster."

Marcus Gee, Globe

and Mail, July 20

ARE election-poised councillors and staff in our three North Shore communities watching what is happening in the City of Toronto?

If not, perhaps they should, because the administration of stop-the-gravy-train Mayor Rob Ford is in one serious pickle; if Lower Mainland municipalities are not careful, they'll end up in the same predicament.

Faced with the need to live up to his bombastic election promises that he would cut waste without cutting services, Ford did what all good politicians do, he ordered a study. Predictably, this expensive strategy backfired.

Because, as Globe and Mail columnist Marcus Gee wrote, "City council committees have balked at making the cuts set out in a series of reports from KPMG consultants."

No kidding. And Toronto councillors are not even facing an election come November.

In brief, no-one wants to take responsibility for making the cuts Ford said would not hurt.

To understand what is really wrong with this picture, we must return to the opening quote: Councillors were "listening to a procession of interest groups explain why those cuts (suggested by KPMG) would be a disaster."

Moving westward, those interest groups are thee and me.

If we object to never-ending tax increases, and want to avoid the Torontosyndrome, the effort to establish affordable priorities must be a joint exercise between taxpayers and governments.

So how about fleshing out some of the suggestions I made last week?

Let's say the North Shore had a single, nine-member council: a mayor, two councillors from each of the three communities plus one elected to represent our interests to TransLink, and another to sit on the Metro board.

Each North Shore community would have specific representation, and citizen-election of the two regional positions would eliminate a mayor's need to "take off (his/her) council hat when sitting at the GVRD table," as former mayor Don Bell once said.

That's the easiest part, solved by reducing the number of North Shore seats up for grabs in the 2014 local elections.

From here on, things become more difficult.

First, the new council would need only one city manager, one chief financial officer, one legal advisor - in fact, only one head of each department throughout the organization.

The next move must be to streamline non-exempt staffing - unfortunate, because this means cutting jobs.

Region-wide, there seems to be general agreement that people want taxation and spending stabilized without service cuts.

So given that salaries and benefits typically account for more than 75 per cent of municipal spending, whether or not unions plan to balk at zero per cent increases during 2012 contract negotiations, that page of the budget is the first place to look for efficiencies.

In the last census, the combined North Shore population was approaching 185,000. It seems to make sense, therefore, to examine per-capita staffing levels in well-run, similarly sized

communities - in or outside B.C. - and to model the new staff contingent along similar lines.

Amalgamation or no, attrition by voluntary job-sharing, by normal retirement or via persuasive early-retirement packages is by far the preferred way to reduce unaffordable staffing levels, so that demographic trends and a transition period of three years can soften the blow.

That said, this phase will not be without upsetting decent people who are guilty of nothing more than voting to support their unions' demands for generous salary-benefit packages.

The next topic on the dartboard is that of council policies and bylaws.

General rule: If a bylaw cannot be enforced, or if the dubious wisdom of evolving staffs and councils cannot decide on appropriate wording, erase it from the books and agendas.

Specifically, District of North Vancouver residents cannot afford to waste any more money on decades-long discussions and staff reports about tree bylaws - especially when council's July decision was to boot its vote on the subject down the road to beyond the November election.

Next: How about our councils commission an auditor to examine the hidden costs - legal or otherwise - that arise when arbitrators overturn official council policies covering employer-employee agreements?

That's it for now, except to say that reactions to my earlier comments on firefighter-paramedic issues have pointed me in some interesting directions which I hope to discuss later this month.

So, thanks in part to your much-appreciated responses to last week's column, the beat goes on.

Keep 'em coming.

rimco@shaw.ca

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