

BAY COMMENT

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Municipal decision making - an oxymoron?

A key role of leaders of organizations is to make decisions. Not just any decision but good decisions - decisions which will maximize the benefits to the organization and its stakeholders. It seems that there are particular challenges in making effective decisions in the municipal sector. An inordinate amount of time and effort and the damaging of community spirit and cohesiveness seem to be much in play.

When you take on the big job to be a leader of our community, you take on responsibility to make decisions - some of which are difficult. The citizens of our community are impacted by these decisions and are therefore relying on the councillors and mayor to evaluate the appropriate information and make decisions for the right reason. The citizens know that the decisions may not be popular but the citizens can respect unpopular decisions if they are made for the right reason which means good for the whole, based on the right information (i.e. complete and accurate), and will benefit the future of the community. Sound and prudent decisions are based on utilizing a fully informed process to arrive at a timely decision.

There has been considerable disappointment over a couple of recent municipal decisions.

Case in point. The City of



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Burlington took ownership of the Freeman Train Station a number of years ago and saved this piece of heritage from demolition and put it in a temporary storage position. Since 2005, staff and council have been assessing potential relocation sites in consultation with the Burlington public. By January 2010, staff identified that it was critical that a permanent site for the poor station be found as the City's temporary storage was resulting in considerable deterioration of the building

Effective decision making requires alternatives to be identified. The city staff identified a list of 35 potential sites - this is good. Evaluation criteria for site selection were established - another good step. The list of 35 sites was shortened to 7 sites and the pros and constraints of each site identified. The staff also identified 14 adaptive reuse possibilities and narrowed these to 7 possible ones to consider.

According to a staff report, it was

proposed that the Freeman Station would be relocated, restored and substantially completed by March 2011. This project was awarded over \$600,000 of funding from federal stimulus funds. With the City's required funds, this was a million dollar project.

So how is it that we have arrived at a point where none of the identified sites turned out to be acceptable and there is no decision on a use for the station? This has dragged on for years, has absorbed a huge amount of staff time, thousands of hours of time by volunteers, numerous public meetings, numerous presentations to Council, and decisions made and unmade between Committee meetings and Council meetings all of which consisted of the same persons.

The City's process was flawed. One after one, locations would be considered, taken to the public for consideration—and then would be rejected due to incomplete consideration by the City on the adverse impact of the location to the public, neighbours, or functionality. This was a waste of resources and created more angst than necessary and ultimately the opportunity was lost.

At the end of this painful process

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where is the City with this "heritage jewel"? The federal stimulus money has been lost - reallocated to fixing roads.

The building is now effectively 'up for sale' - a request for proposal has been issued for the acquisition, relocation, restoration, and re-adaptation of the historic Freeman/Burlington West 1906 Grand Trunk Railway Station.

It is sad to see how this piece of heritage has been literally dragged through the mud through a series of governance missteps.

And there is the Hamilton stadium issue - I'm not even going to try to analyze that

one.

Is it any wonder citizens are highly sceptical of the ability of elected officials to make the right decision?

You hear the often said phrase "It is politics don't you know". Well I would like to think that our municipal politicians want to be elected for doing the right thing not the pandering thing or the expedient thing or the self-interested thing.

Fay Booker is principal of Booker & Associates, a firm focused on promoting good governance, enterprise risk management and operational effectiveness - www.bookerandassociates.com. She can be reached at info@bookerandassociates.com.