

Mayor's Mission for Smaller Government

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There is a theme behind many key decisions coming from the City's Administration. You saw it when Council cut the vehicle registration tax, and when the Mayor basically ignored the outcome of both federal and provincial budgets. It was apparent in the announcement of the transit plan negotiated with the Provincial Government. That theme is the Mayor's belief in smaller government.

Even with ample justification from an inherited budget, the Administration chose to set the City organization's growth rate almost to zero. Although there is ample room for program expansion through new and existing taxes, Council agreed to cut the vehicle registration tax.

Usually the federal and provincial budgets are important moments in the City's financial year, when the City takes the opportunity to ask for funding. This time, other than signing a form letter and one interview, there was little interest from the Mayor.

On the other hand his Administration turned a fully funded transit plan, albeit one that he promised to stop, into a \$4 billion unfunded commitment. It's money that the City does not have, nor does the Administration intend to ask for it from taxpayers.

Another part of the puzzle will fall into place this autumn as teams of consultants report back on what they consider core services and opportunities for savings. Other Administrations would use the opportunity to save as many programs as possible, and perhaps even expand a select few. This one sees virtue in smaller government, and will not hesitate to support recommendations which shares such a perspective.

As the level of government closest to people's lives, carrying out these decisions will make an enormous impact. It will force us to ask what we want from our City government. Clearly, to keep our quality of life, we need more than a transit agency and security force. But what do we keep, and how will we deliver services?

Not so long ago, residents of the 416 area code shared six different models of municipal government. Etobicoke obtained savings through its private waste collection service. The city core paid for recreation programs by property taxes. Scarborough provided many services through volunteers. North York extracted funds from developers in exchange for extra densities.

Since amalgamation the ability to learn from local experience has been lost. Unable to defend differing service levels from one tax rate, Council's easiest route has been to standardize services at the highest level. The only surprise is that it has taken so long to achieve the political will to make significant change.

The vision for smaller municipal government and the upcoming consultants' report are the easiest first steps. Instead of six semi-independent, competitive, local governments, we are now bound by one set of rules, taxes and bureaucracy. Each program, no matter how small, will have defenders.

Accountants and voters both agree that we cannot go back to a financially and politically unsustainable model. Our big challenge is to respond to residents' needs in new ways. It is a goal is far easier said than approved, paid for, or delivered.

The good news is that the world has changed beyond our boundaries as well. New tools are available to assist government partnerships with the private sector. Other municipalities are willing to share their experiences in service delivery. And the public says that it is willing to give other options a try, including the reduction of services.

These are big ideas, and form the main theme of this Administration. How well it works in our lives depends not only on the single mindedness of the Mayor – of that we can be certain – but also his skill in establishing new models, and willingness of residents to adapt to change.