

Cutting Council's Advisory Committees

submitted 14 Apr 11

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Had the recent report cutting Council's Advisory Committees been strictly for cost reduction or to remove inequalities, then it would have been understandable. Unfortunately wielding the axe so broadly with so little justification seems like crude governance.

Although the recommendations also speak about continuing to look for alternatives, there is no requirement for further decisions from Council. As a result, once this report is approved, final decisions will have been made.

Every term the City Manager goes through a similar exercise. There are about 25 such committees, almost all containing volunteers, most with a Councillor appointed to provide liaison to the political process. Usually these were established to provide ongoing advocacy on issues that Council thought important. For example, the establishment of the children's services committee came forward when Council approved a major report detailing what services ought to be provided to children.

Admittedly some Committees have outlived their usefulness. A good example is the French Committee, which is to advocate for the City's francophones. Without the active support of Mayors past, it would have either disappeared or changed into a support group for languages that are more frequently heard in Toronto.

But by cutting at one step almost all of these Committees, considerable expertise and constructive work is lost as well. Take for example the Economic Competitiveness Committee. It was assembled three terms ago as part of a package of reforms that included lowering taxes for both businesses and apartment buildings.

That work was successful enough to be mentioned in Mayor Miller's election campaign. Its reports carried enough credence to be mined for recommendations last term and in the most recent mayoral campaign. Its members were tapped for other boards, and used as unpaid consultants when Council struggled with new taxes last term. And yet it is classified with the Don Valley Brick Works Committee as a 'redundant, dormant' organization, or that its mandate is complete.

Suspicious folk point out that some of the Committees planned for dissolution take views probably not shared by the Mayor. They are correct. Probably very few members of the Art Committee, and ones supporting environmental goals had 'Ford for Mayor' lawn signs.

Those on the other side will say that the management of those committees consumes scarce resources. They say outside advice can be gained much more efficiently. They claim some Committees should have been terminated years ago. This too is correct.

Some are unhappy that the Tenant Defence Fund and the grants appeals committee usurp Council's role in allocating public funds. Again, it is hard to argue.

Both sides observe that the new political reality means there is little support for recommendations for a harm reduction drug strategy or increased services within the City's long term care homes. Where views differ is in the need to have that perspective presented directly to Council.

One response to problems on both sides of this divide is to deal with the Committees individually. Without a doubt, if a task like implementing a project is complete, then the Committee ought to be disbanded. Or if volunteers supporting the Task Force to Bring Back the Don River need the permission, fundraising ability and publicity to paddle the river, then accommodation can be made outside of a formal structure. Groups to support at risk populations such as Aboriginals can meet informally and be given access to City staff.

While it makes the most sense to deal with each Committee separately, politics dictate otherwise. The current report will put the Administration on the defensive for one Council cycle. In return, a wide range of low level, ongoing trouble is gone for the rest of the term.

The alternative of pursuing a nuanced approach to address the challenges of each of the 25 or so Committees is enough to give a headache to the most seasoned of operatives. Instead of a handful of recommendations dealing with all the Committees, the Administration could face multiple reports, each with deputations. Admittedly, opportunities for bad news and losing control are high.

However citizens did vote in record numbers for major change and for a Mayor who said he would be looking efficiencies throughout the organization. Here is such an opportunity. A willingness to cut and radically change are long overdue. But to simply cut without considering benefits will create as many problems as it solves.

