EXECUTIVE POLICY COMMITTEE

QUESTION PERIOD

Minute No. 571
Councillor Gerbasi stated that the context of the Veolia contract remained under lock and key, away from public scrutiny, and according to the Chief Administrative Officers' comments in the newspaper, the policy was not to release anything for fear of revealing proprietary information. She noted that many other cities black out the proprietary information, release the rest of the information and questioned why the City does not do that rather than keeping entire contracts under wraps, appearing extremely secretive.

His Worship stated he believed there was no government more open and transparent than Winnipeg and that he would be happy to follow up regarding the concern; he noted that there had been situations where similar information had been released with information blacked out.

Councillor Gerbasi indicated that the City of Winnipeg was more secretive than other cities, according to a national agency undertaking a study, and questioned if the Mayor would be prepared to look into that and consider changing the policy.

His Worship replied that he would not comment on a national agency that he had had no dialogue with and his concern was running the City and that he worked hard to make sure citizens and Councillors had the information they required.

In reference to the Building Canada Fund, Councillor Gerbasi noted that it was a major source of infrastructure money, but that funds had not been directed towards Rapid Transit; she questioned where the Building Canada Funds would be spent.

His Worship advised that Council put forward a list of infrastructure projects, which had been submitted to both the Provincial and the Federal governments for equal share funding and that the three parties had agreed to move forward on Plessis Road, but that the City was still waiting to hear about the other projects.

In reference to an article about photo radar, Councillor Fielding asked the Mayor to elaborate on any discussions he may have with the Premier regarding concerns about photo radar. His Worship indicated that he had never had any communication with the Premier on photo radar.

Councillor Browaty referred to the recent Provincial Election, noted that His Worship recently questioned in a press conference the lack of announcements regarding infrastructure funding and asked if the Mayor had heard any encouraging words.

His Worship stated he was extremely disappointed with all of the leaders in the upcoming election who wanted to form the next government. In reference to media reports, he noted that over three billion dollars in promises were made and very little of that had to do with infrastructure. The Mayor indicated that the City had a 3.8 billion dollar infrastructure deficit and it was impossible to slay that dragon when the City only received eight cents of every tax dollar spent.

Executive Policy Committee – Question Period (continued):

He noted that Council had asked the Provincial Government for one point of the existing seven points of P.S.T. above and beyond that already received and that Mayors, Reeves and Councillors across the Province had also moved this forward. His Worship stated that since he became Mayor, the top two issues had always been infrastructure and crime and safety, with infrastructure often number one. The many other promises were very worthy, but if your City was falling apart, and you could not drive on the roads, walk on the sidewalks, or cross a bridge because of the state of repair, and if community centres were falling apart what were they worth. His Worship concluded that he had no idea why this would be ignored but it seemed to be overlooked that the Provincial Government received millions or even billions of dollars in transfer payments from the Federal Government and that the City was getting peanuts to address one of the biggest challenges faced.

Councillor Browaty asked if staff had had a chance to look at the election promises made by leading parties and whether or not they were talking about day one police officers or ten year police officers and whether or not there was additional funding in additional years as the salaries escalate quite quickly.

His Worship confirmed that election promises were being made and policing seemed to be coming up quite a bit, and he specifically stated to all the leaders that if they were making a promise and it had to do with policing, to ensure that they were covering all of the costs. He clarified that what he meant by that was that a police officer hired in the first year makes approximately 40,000 per year and, in five years, that doubles as well as employee benefits, as well as pension, and if they were making a commitment then you deal with all of the issues from top to bottom with all the expenses and that applies to everyone out there during this election. His Worship indicated that he also made it clear that the Chief of Police should make the decision where resources are assigned and no elected official should be telling the Chief of Police how or where to assign resources.

Councillor Smith noted that according to the National Freedom of Information Audit, cities that scored highest in full disclosure were Regina, Saskatchewan, Montreal, Sherbrook, Quebec City and Charlottetown. He added that Winnipeg had the worst record in providing information to the citizens under Freedom of Information program and questioned what the Mayor and EPC members were going to do to change that.

His Worship replied that the City had a process in place and if there was a belief that it should be changed than maybe Council should all sit down and have a discussion on it. He added that in any scenario, some cities rank high, some low, some in the middle and that when he was involved and people ask for information, he tried to make sure they got that information.

Councillor Smith questioned why the City was not getting any revenue from electronic billboards to which His Worship agreed that they should be paying and that he understood they were trying to formulate something and hopefully something should come into effect as soon as possible.

Executive Policy Committee – Question Period (continued):

Councillor Wyatt questioned what the Mayor was going to do in terms of leadership as the City goes forward to change so that we, as a Province, could galvanize municipal issues, which were important to the citizens of Winnipeg.

His Worship suggested that a lot had been heard during this provincial election about health care, crime and safety, community centres, all important issues, but the public had made it very clear to the City of Winnipeg and other provincial municipalities that infrastructure was important to them and whichever leader comes forward with the plan to address the infrastructure deficit and really do something as a leader, he would consider supporting with his vote. He added that he would keep talking to the media to try and get the message out there and stated he was open to new suggestions.

Councillor Wyatt indicated that his suggestion would be to undertake the development of a new strategy, with fellow municipalities and the AMM, to completely revise the approach in terms of how to approach and lobby the Province and asked the Mayor if he would be prepared to lead this drive.

His Worship indicated that he was open to discussing Councillor Wyatt's suggestion. He suggested that one of the biggest problems was that the City was a creature of the Provincial Government and part of the problem was on most occasions the Federal Government deals directly with the Provincial Government, and then the Provincial Government deals with us. He added that he had spoken with many Mayors who think it was time to change that. The whole system was created when the majority of the population lived in a rural community and that had changed, with two-thirds of the population of the Province now living in the City of Winnipeg. His Worship referenced a battle to get the gas tax to go towards the infrastructure but the gas tax was going to flow through the Provincial Government and they were then going to cut the City a cheque and were going to charge a processing fee or a service fee as a condition and the Mayor vehemently opposed this and stated that if the Province did that then the Federal Government should flow it directly to the City. The Province stepped back and did not charge the fee but stated the mayors need to start lobbying the Federal Government in certain situations to be dealing directly with the Civic Government.

Councillor Wyatt asked if the Mayor would be prepared, before Election Day, to issue a letter to the party leaders reiterating and expressing our severe and deep concern of the state of the election debate and ask them / plead with them on behalf of the citizens of Winnipeg, to have this issue addressed as the existing situation cannot continue. His Worship confirmed he would have it done by the end of the day and was willing to do whatever it took to make sure this important issue was not ignored.

Councillor Eadie referred to a huge problem with Dutch Elm disease, noted an advanced movement of the disease in River Heights, and that trees were being removed at an alarming pace. He questioned what additional measures could be taken to deal with the problem and asked if cash flow was part of the problem.

Executive Policy Committee – Consideration of By-laws (continued):

His Worship confirmed that Dutch Elm disease had been around for a while and stated the department was doing everything possible and agreed to follow up and find out what the problem was and determine if it was money, which he had not heard to be the case, and concluded that it was extremely important to save the Elm trees.

Councillor Eadie asked what would be done to improve the cash flow to repair the roads that need to be renewed given that 8 million of current road renewal comes from the Province and two million from the City.

His Worship advised that the majority of revenue comes from property tax and hard work was done to have a positive environment to get people to come to the city, start businesses and continue to build. He added that the tax base had been broadened and that there were other sources of revenue; noting that when referring to the amount of money coming from the Province and from the City, it is all coming from the same taxpayer, and those are the people using the roads, bridges, sidewalks, etc. He concluded that the city was increasing the capital budget every year but also wants to continue to grow revenue.