

November 30, 2011

Fast-tracking the public

It is often said about municipal government that it is the level of government closest to the people. In Canada municipal elections generally have the lowest voter turnout compared to federal and provincial elections, yet it is the level of government that effects people right where they live.

If you have a problem in your neighbourhood with noise, speeding, flooding, or a new development you oppose, you call your municipal town hall.

If you don't like your federal government's tough-on-crime legislation, you write a letter to your Member of Parliament and beyond that, there is little more you can do. Likewise if you don't like your provincial government's position on industrial wind turbines, you write letters to your Member of Provincial Parliament; and beyond that you don't have much of a voice. You simply cannot get to the Minister in charge of the legislation; they are shielded from the public so you cannot get to the actual decision makers.

Local government is different. The decision makers live in your wards and neighbourhoods, and are just a phone call away. Some councillors are quicker to respond to constituents and depending on the issue, they might never call you back, but then you have the option of speaking to them at council or committee meetings. Anyone can make a delegation to council; you have 10 minutes to state your case to a captive audience and be heard. As the many speakers who spoke against the incinerator can attest to, you can speak to council but you can't make them listen.

As access to government is a democratic right, it is incumbent for government to make itself accessible. This week, Clarington council debated how to make public meetings more accessible. Traditionally, statutory public meetings are held during Monday morning General Purpose and Committee meetings. While this time of day suits council members and municipal staff, it is not always convenient for members of the public. Anyone who works during the day and wants to speak to councillors in support or against a proposed development has to take time off work to do so. While residents can write letters expressing their concerns, it does not have the same impact as speaking directly to councillors at a public meeting. The argument is also made that residents, who cannot attend public meetings on Monday morning, can address council members the following Monday night at the council meeting. By that time council has already made a decision on the matter, and seldom does it overturn a decision made at the general purpose meeting, so again, addressing council at that late stage does not have the same impact as addressing it during the morning public meeting.

Acting on a complaint from a Newcastle resident who wanted to speak at a public meeting on the proposed grocery store for Newcastle, and was not happy about having to wait a good part of the day for his chance to speak, council asked staff to look into holding public meetings in the evening.

This, according to the staff report, would present a whole new set of challenges, so councillors opted to remain with the status quo. They did however alter the agenda so public meetings are held before presentations by other government representatives, who do not have to adhere to the 10 minutes allocated to public delegations.

While this does not deal with the problem of residents having to take time off work to speak at a public meeting, it does show some respect to those residents who take the time to address councillors, by putting them ahead of those who, address council as part of their working day.

Anytime you make the political process more accessible and open to the public it is a win for democracy, and that is a good thing.