

Councillors need to find some common ground

Clarington's new council has six meetings under its belt and it is very evident it is having some struggles.

It didn't take long for the divisions on council to surface. There also seems to be some confusion as to who some councillors are representing: their constituents or municipal staff.

Newly elected Mayor Adrian Foster has said on more than one occasion that the last four years of council were four wasted years.

When Mayor Jim Abernethy swept to power in 2006, he was a breath of fresh air in a council chamber that had been dominated by Mayor John Mutton who ruled as a dictator, using intimidation and bullying tactics to get his own way.

It became evident fairly soon into Abernethy's term of office that he was not a strong leader. For the most part, the past council was divided between the three regional councillors -- including the Mayor -- and the four local councillors. The regional councillors voted in favour of the incinerator and the four local councillors voted against it.

On numerous occasions, Abernethy would present a motion to councillors on the council floor, without any warning. More times than not, councillors would reject Abernethy's motions simply for the way they were presented, rather than for their content. Abernethy's opportunity to affect change was hampered by his inability to learn how the process worked. Rather than working with fellow councillors to receive some kind of consensus on his motions before presenting them, Abernethy tended to work alone, and then lament the fact that he could not get council's support for his ideas.

Mutton worked in the opposite manner. He received total council support before his motions were introduced on the council floor; hence, most of his motions were adopted unanimously with little or no debate on the council floor.

The IQ on council is higher than it has been in a long time, but it takes more than smarts to learn to work together.

Two of the three new councillors on Clarington's current council have legal backgrounds, one a practicing lawyer -- Councillor Joe Neal -- the other, Councillor Corinna Traill, a law student.

While all of the current councillors (except Mary Novak of Courtice) positioned themselves during the recent election campaign as opposed to the Region's proposed garbage incinerator project for Courtice, once elected, it seems the strength of that anti-incineration conviction varies among Clarington's councillors.

It is full steam ahead for Neal and Traill. They have demonstrated they are not afraid to go head-to-head with the Region of Durham, in an approach that the remaining councillors seem very reluctant to join. Neal's motion to get a second legal opinion, from an expert in the field, in regards to the agreement the

Region negotiated with Clarington as host of its garbage incinerator, seemed like a reasonable position to take. Yet, with only the support of Councillor Traill, that motion failed. This week, he tried to clarify that a judicial review was not a threat of litigation, yet the majority of his fellow councillors failed to see the point.

It is still early days for this council, and they have waded quickly and deeply into the murky waters of the incinerator project. If the previous council had opted to listen to the advice from its solicitor regarding the HCA, we might have been in a better position now.

It appears Councillors Neal and Traill are attempting to stop the incinerator from being built, while the rest of council have resigned themselves to the fact that it is coming.

Somehow this council has to find a way to work together. Neal and Traill could have the best ideas in the world, but without support of at least two more councillors, they will never be able to pass a single motion. And if the rest of council spends the whole of this term defeating all of Neal and Traill's motions for reasons other than the merits of those motions, this will be another wasted four years.

Six meetings into a four-year term do not define a council, but if they aren't careful it could set the tone. There is a lot of potential on this council and a greater effort should be made to find some common ground, so great things can happen in Clarington.