

Metroland

Mayor apologizes for local councillors' 'inexcusable' behavior

Fri Jun 01, 2007

By Jennifer Stone

CLARINGTON -- Mayor Jim Abernethy has formally apologized to the Regional chairman for what he calls the "inappropriate and inexcusable" behaviour of Clarington's local councillors.

In a letter sent Wednesday, Mayor Abernethy tells Roger Anderson he "apologize(s) for the disrespect that was shown to the Office of the Chairman of the Region of Durham by our four local councillors," who voted not to allow the chairman to speak at council Monday.

"I am sure that the general public will agree that nothing was gained by the actions of our local councillors," Mayor Abernethy said.

The decision not to allow the chairman to speak about the proposed Energy From Waste -- or incineration -- facility was not a matter of disrespect for Mr. Anderson, the four local councillors contended. Rather, they said, it was a matter of letting the Region know Clarington would not be told what studies it can and can't do while reviewing all the materials and determining whether the Municipality will be a willing host to the proposed incinerator.

"We just basically want to make the chairman aware that we have concerns in our community... In order to do our due diligence, we want to have our staff carry out a full study so we can make an informed decision," said Ward 3 Councillor Willie Woo.

Clarington staff had recommended an extensive peer review of all information on the proposed project so far. The Region had agreed to upfront all "reasonable costs," but last week had approved a \$200,000 cap on how much would be provided. Anything beyond \$200,000 would be subject to Regional council approval.

Clarington staff has estimated the cost of its proposed review at about half a million dollars.

Two weeks ago, the four local councillors teamed up to vote down the three regional councillors on whether to allow staff to go ahead, even absent a specific price tag. But Clarington's regional councillors contended they were not willing to simply give a blank cheque to staff, especially given the Region's cap.

Not to allow Mr. Anderson to speak to council denied the community to have questions answered, said Mayor Abernethy.

"The local councillors may have been technically correct in not voting to allow the motion for the chair(man) to speak, but morally, I don't think it was correct," said the mayor from Calgary, where he is attending a Federation of Canadian Municipalities conference.

"We should be allowing everyone to speak in our chambers," he said. "We shouldn't be deciding who speaks and who doesn't speak, especially on such an important issue."

The letter, he said, was a matter of trying to "patch a fence" with the Region, not an issue of furthering a rift in council. In fact, the mayor was quick to point out he doesn't want it to seem a "regional vs. local" councillor issue.

While the letter "is not helpful" in ensuring there is no such divide, Ward 1 Councillor Adrian Foster said he's hopeful this doesn't signify an enduring gulf between the two.

"On this issue, yes, there is division," said Coun. Foster. But, "I would really hope, moving forward, no, because we're all there with a common goal."

But, "we're sure not on the same page on this one," he said.

Most local councillors said they wouldn't take back Monday's actions.

"I'm not going to apologize for doing what I think is right for Clarington," said Coun. Foster.

Likewise, Ward 4 Local councillor Gord Robinson said he stood by his actions, noting the mayor "does not speak for the members of council."

Coun. Woo said if he had it to do over, he'd still vote against allowing the chairman to speak.

"If Jim feels he needs to apologize on behalf of the citizens because of the reaction of the four local councillors ... that's his prerogative," he said, noting the local councillors may have gone a little "over the top."

While Ward 2's Ron Hooper said Monday's vote "may have not been the correct thing to do," it was a matter of letting the Region know Clarington intends to do its full due diligence before making a decision.

Everyone wants to know the same thing, said Coun. Foster.

"At the end of the day, just tell us if this thing is safe," he said.