

Junkets anger taxpayers

Markham

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Trip to Italy helped local economy, regional chairperson says

By: Joan Ransberry

They're baaaaaack — well almost all of them.

Taxpayers got their money's worth when they picked up the \$26,000 tab for a two-week junket to Italy, York Region chairperson Bill Fisch insisted.

"We met with a number of companies," Mr. Fisch said. "It was my job to encourage (Italian) companies to relocate or invest in the City of Vaughan. I was able to give them a good sense of what York Region was all about and what the GTA was all about, while helping Vaughan accomplish getting their city sold."

Mr. Fisch, Vaughan Mayor Linda Jackson, Vaughan regional councillors Mario Ferri and Joyce Frustaglio, Vaughan director of economic development Emilia Valentini and representatives of the Italian-Toronto and Vaughan chambers of commerce flew to Europe July 3. Once in Italy, the group was met by Lina Bigioni, Mr. Fisch's executive assistant and government relations director. To accommodate a one-week vacation, Ms Bigioni arrived in Italy a few days before the others and is expected to return Monday.

Mr. Fisch, who approved Ms Bigioni's one-week vacation, stressed she paid all expenses linked to her personal time in the country.

Ms Bigioni's airfare, paid by York Region, was the same price as the others, Mr. Fisch added.

"Her vacation was at her own expense," he said.

Vaughan's mayor is making no apologies for the junket.

"We're in talks with a large manufacturer on a deal to open a facility in Vaughan, " Ms Jackson said, adding the trip consisted of interviews, tours of plants and meetings with dignitaries of various cities, including the vice mayor of Rome.

Regardless of how fruitful the trip may have been, some view political junkets as hot potatoes.

"Our taxes are exorbitant and here we have the prime minister in South America trying to fix what he can't fix at home and here we have our guys (York Regional politicians and staff) flying to Europe and sleeping in expensive hotels," Ossie Allan of Newmarket said. "Where's the accountability? Who's suppose to provide the money? I pay so damned much in taxes, I get to take my boys to Lake Scugog in Port Perry to fish for the day. That's our vacation. How much did it we (taxpayers) pay this time?"

Accommodations were "not five star", Ms Jackson said, adding the delegation rode the bus and one night's stay was at a farm with no air conditioning.

This won't be the last trade mission either, the Vaughan mayor said.

"We'll be doing them again if we feel there is value," she said, adding delegations from Vaughan have gone to Italy since 1988.

Still, neither York Region nor Vaughan officials let the public know this particular junket was pending, although two years ago, Vaughan issued a detailed media release explaining how an upcoming six-day business mission to Europe would, hopefully, result in Italy investing in Vaughan.

This trip was kept low-key by design, Vaughan communications director Madeline Zito said. The game plan was to keep the trip's findings under wraps until after the delegation returned.

While York Region's communications department confirmed the pending junket, no information linked to the itinerary was offered during the initial inquiry.

Following numerous calls to the region, Vaughan, the Italian Chamber of Commerce and the Vaughan Chamber of Commerce, information trickled in. The Era-Banner eventually learned the group's trip was to make stops in Milano, Parma, Sondrio, Torino, Sora and Calabria.

The Era Banner also learned the \$10,000 to send Mr. Fisch and Ms Bigioni to and from Italy was not approved as a specific expense by York Region council. Rather, the junket item falls within York Region's \$264,000 general expense category alongside the cost of cellphones and computer software.

Meanwhile, Vaughan's \$20,000 cost to send their four representatives to Italy was offset by \$4,000 from the Italian Chamber of Commerce.

No one's disputing the need for York Region and Vaughan to do business in Italy, which has a population of 60 million — Italy is Canada's 11th largest trading partner, while Italian investment in Canada rose to \$982 million in 2005.

However, one person resented the fact the general public was not told a trip was in the works to sell York Region, specifically Vaughan, to the Italian business community and explore Italy-based energy-from-waste incineration facilities.

Coming across some information, the whistle blower tipped off The Era-Banner.

Mr. Fisch said nothing about the delegation visiting energy from waste facilities while in Italy, however, Ms Zito emphasized advancements made by the Italians in the area of waste management are impressive and worth exploring.

Meanwhile, Newmarket Councillor Dave Kerwin also thinks the way Europeans handle garbage deserves attention. He, too, is on a fact-finding mission to Europe. Paying his own way and accompanied by his wife, Mr. Kerwin is visiting waste facilities in Italy, Germany and Holland.

As well, more residents are questioning why Canadian politicians continue to study waste management in Europe.

Politicians don't need to travel to Italy to see up-to-date technology linked to incineration, according to Brian Webb, a retired engineer who specialized in the design of energy-from-waste facilities.

"We've had the the technology in our own back yard for 30 years," Mr. Webb said. "I don't know why the politicians keep going to Europe. Besides, how can people who are not engineers properly gather information."