

A drastic change

Thirteen months into the job, it is safe to say that Mayor Jim Abernethy's honeymoon is over. For the interview we conducted with the Mayor last week, reflecting on the year that was, Abernethy used his election material as a guide to what he wanted to achieve, and what has been accomplished.

Number one item under the heading "As your Mayor Jim Abernethy will" is the promise to "lead an open, honest, accountable municipal council."

There is no doubt, respect and civility have returned to the council chamber under Mayor Abernethy's reign. He doesn't play with his blackberry, or chat to fellow councillors when members of the public are addressing council.

There is no doubt Abernethy's leadership style is far removed from the dictatorial style exercised by the previous Mayor, it is however, difficult to determine what type of leadership style Abernethy is exercising. During our interview last Friday, Abernethy said that while he has a lot of management experience, as head of council he has to manage by consensus, which requires a lot of forward planning to get the desired results. No doubt consensus building takes longer than arm twisting, however, there does not seem to be a lot of leadership evident thus far. It is apparent though, that not all decisions are made prior to council meetings. There is now discussion and debate on the council floor before votes are taken on many issues, which is a welcome change from the previous establishment.

There is no doubt there is a sense of openness with the current council, however the number of times councillors go behind closed doors to discuss issues has not decreased. Council is legally allowed to go behind closed doors to discuss items of a financial, personnel or legal nature. These closed door sessions occur more frequently than in the past, and they have increased considerably in length.

While the Mayor claims this council is not divided, we are not convinced. The four local councillors - Foster, Hooper, Robinson and Woo, vote against the three Regional councillors - Novak, Trim and Abernethy, on almost every item dealing with the energy from waste (EFW) issue. It appears that the Regional Councillors though elected by Clarington residents to protect their interests on the EFW issue seem to be working harder to protect the Region's best interests. As it is the Clarington residents who elect councillors, this practice might backfire on the Regional councillors seeking support from local voters in the next municipal election, three years from now.

Promise number two on Abernethy's election flier was that he would listen on important issues such as energy, growth and the environment. It is clear from our interview that he is listening as he promised, however, we're not sure who he is listening to. On the biggest issue facing this municipality and region in years; --the proposed EFW facility -- Abernethy stated in our interview that he is more interested in listening to government agencies and representatives, who have experience with EFW facilities rather than listening to a radical group.

We're not sure who the Mayor is referring to in his 'radical group' label because most of the people who have voiced objection to the proposed EFW over the past nine months have done so in an informed, respectful manner. They are for the most part, individual residents who have done research on the topic and have decided that they don't want an incinerator in their community. This list also includes a number of local physicians who have indicated their lack of support for the project due to health reasons. The number one concern of those opposed to the EFW, is the health and environmental effects an incinerator could have on a community. We're hoping the Mayor is not labeling everyone who is doing their own research, rather than buying all the pro incinerator information the Region is supplying, as 'radical'. Some of the people who have spoken out in favour of the incinerator could easily fit the 'radical' definition.

It is also evident from the EFW process to date, that the Mayor has not yet achieved item number eight on his election flyer. In item eight, he promises to "assure a strong position for Clarington within the GTA and all other levels of government." He has not quite managed yet to secure a strong position for Clarington within the Region of Durham unless having the preferred site for the proposed incinerator can be seen as an advantage. This is clearly the Region's project, and Clarington has yet to flex some muscle of it's own in regards to the prospect of being the potential host community for the EFW.

Abernethy has another three years to work on his promises, but whether he makes any more changes or not, from where we are sitting, the current administration is a drastic improvement over the previous one. We're glad Abernethy is having fun at his job, but we hope this fun is not at the cost of the tax payer.