

Mayor still having fun

Mayor Jim Abernethy says he's still having fun. He admits though, the learning curve was quite steep, after being elected as Clarington's Mayor in November 2006, with no prior political experience. A year into the job Abernethy says he has a better understanding of how things are done.

"While some might say we have a divided council, I disagree," Abernethy stated. One of his campaign promises was to bring about a more democratic process in council, and he thinks he's achieved that goal with the current council.

Abernethy claims he has also achieved his initiative to reduce the operating cost of the Mayor's Office, and he has not taken any international trips at taxpayer expense; another one of his election promises. The two international trips Abernethy took last year, one to Europe and the other to Florida, to gain knowledge on the EFW process, were taken at his own expense. He took a trip to Halifax last year to observe a landfill operation for which the municipality paid. Abernethy has also voluntarily reduced the gas allowance he is paid by the municipality.

While he did campaign to hold the line on tax increases, Abernethy says the large tax increase last year was due mainly to decisions made by the previous council. The 8.25 percent municipal tax increase last year, was the largest increase in recent memory.

Council cut its teeth on some pretty big issues so far this term according to Abernethy. Last March, on the eve of the budget deliberations, representatives from the Memorial Hospital Foundation asked council for a \$2 million contribution to their \$10 million redevelopment plan. Both very important issues, according to Abernethy; health care and taxes. "I think council made the right decision not to incorporate health care into the property tax levee," he stated.

Abernethy often reminds residents that the waste management issue is very contentious and is the single biggest issue municipalities will be dealing with this term.

As Durham and York Regions are jointly involved in an environmental assessment process for an EFW facility, Abernethy says he suspects the controversy over the proposed facility will last well into 2008.

"My belief is," Abernethy stated, "If we're going to end up with a facility in Durham, it should be the best available technology that is out there." People should not have concerns about toxic emissions such as dioxins coming from the proposed EFW because of the technology that is available today, according to Abernethy. In doing research, Abernethy says he's been able to find reassurances from Provincial and Federal officials as to the safety of EFW facilities.. "At the end of the day, I'm more interested in listening to government officials who have been there, than listening to a radical group," Abernethy stated. However, he did credit those opposed to the proposed EFW for heightening public awareness of the project.

Once the technology for the incinerator has been selected, and site specific testing indicates the project should proceed, a business case has to be made for the proposed EFW to determine the project's feasibility. If the project fails at that stage, it's on to 'Plan B' according to Abernethy, however he doesn't know what that will be. The foremost consideration in waste management is the illumination of waste, Abernethy said. He has stated publicly that he is opposed to land fill, and the Region of Durham has ruled out the creation of any new landfill sites in the Region. While the practice in North America is to landfill the bottom ash leftover from the EFW burn process, Abernethy claims that in Europe the ash is being used in road construction, and overlay for landfill sites.

"At the end of the day, the most important issue is safety," Abernethy said. "If it can be proved the facility is safe, it doesn't matter where it is." We're not yet at that stage in the EA were it can be determined if Durham's EFW project can be proven to be safe, according to Abernethy. Ultimately it will be up to the Ministry of the Environment to determine if the proposed EFW is safe or not, Abernethy said.

Finally, Abernethy says he's still having fun. 'My first goal is having fun,' he stated. "If you not having fun, it's not worth doing.