

Mayor sits for six more months as interim Green chair

Wednesday, April 30/08

Mayor Jim Abernethy's environmental record was challenged by Mr. Louis Bertrand on Monday.

Bertrand addressed Monday's General Purpose and Administration Committee meeting Monday, on the issue of the Mayor's role as Chair of the Green Community Advisory Committee (GCAC).

In his presentation to the Committee, Bertrand alleged that as the Mayor was not an environmentalist, he was not the best candidate to chair the GCAC. Bertrand cited the Mayor's voting record on the proposed energy-from-waste (EFW) facility as evidence that he was not an environmentalist.

"You suggest that because I haven't said no to EFW, I am incapable of being an environmentalist. I would be willing to put my carbon foot print up against yours any day," Abernethy responded. He informed Bertrand that he had not made a decision on the EFW, which the Regions of York and Durham are proposing to build in Clarington.

"We are going to continue with the environmental assessment to determine whether this facility is safe or not. No one has made it a decision to build it," Abernethy said.

"I believe your position is, because I have not agreed with your position, that I am not an environmentalist," he told Bertrand. Bertrand is on the record as being opposed to incineration.

The Mayor had lobbied committee members prior to the September 18, 2007 inaugural meeting of the GCAC, to support his nomination as Chair of the Committee. No other nominations were made for the position at that first meeting, thus Abernethy was acclaimed. Linda Gasser attended the November 27th meeting of the Committee and brought to their attention that the established protocol for the GCAC states, "Members of Council and municipal staff sitting on the Committee shall not be eligible to assume the position of Chair or Vice-Chair." The Committee opted to hand the matter over to Clarington staff and Council for a ruling and a decision on the issue. "The optics around this are terrible," said Linda Gasser at Monday's General Purpose and Committee meeting. "The Mayor didn't just get elected Chair because everyone thought he was the best person," Gasser stated. "He lobbied for the position, thus giving other members of that Committee a distinct disadvantage."

Clarington staff concluded in their report to Council last week that as no motion was made to reconsider the selection of Chair at the Committee made to reconsider the selection of Chair at the committee meeting prior to Gasser's presentation, the Committee has shown their support the Mayor to remain as Chair, and though he is ineligible for the appointment, they support the decision.

Members of the CGAC entered into a lengthy discussion at their Tuesday, April 22nd meeting regarding the issue of the Chair. Abernethy excused himself from the meeting and the discussion. The members of the committee then passed a Motion of confidence on the Mayor as Chair of the Committee. In addition the members requested that the election of the Chair be revisited in 12 months time.

In an addendum to last week's report, staff are now recommending the Terms of Reference for the committee be amended to allow the Mayor, or member of council, to sit as interim chair for a maximum period of 18 months.

This position was unacceptable to Linda Gasser, who told councillors at Monday's meeting the concept of allowing the Mayor to chair the CGAC for 18 months was too long of a time period, and was inappropriate. "By that time the Committee have set a work plan," she stated. "This will allow for undue political influence in setting the action plan or work plan for that Committee," Gasser said. She said, it was her opinion the community advisory committee was acting more like a Mayor's Task Force.

Councillor Robinson put forward a motion to reduce the 18 month interim chair time period down to a six month starting immediately. As the Mayor has already chaired the Committee for six months, his interim chair period will be 12 months. The motion was adopted, and will go to full council next week Monday for final approval.

"There has been a lot more made out of this than should have been," Mayor Abernethy stated prior to the vote. He called the incident an oversight by staff and council. "This council approved me as being chair," he stated. Council endorsed the Mayor's position as Chair of the Committee when they approved the minutes of the Committee's inaugural meeting.

"Let's move on," said Abernethy. "This is too important a committee to worry about about who is going to drive the car." he stated.