

Dear Editor,

I have read with keen interest your editorial “optics over ethics” wherein you question the value of the City hiring an Integrity Commissioner to oversee questions relating to the activities of individual Councillors and Council as a whole. While it may seem at first blush an unnecessary expenditure (perhaps in the range of one dollar per year per household) an Integrity Commissioner will in my opinion, be a valuable addition to City Hall.

Psychologists will tell you that a small percentage of people are completely honest. They do not need rules, laws or even supervision. Their internal sense of right and wrong is instinctive. For them, an Integrity Commissioner is not needed. At the other end of the scale, a few people are without any sense of right or wrong and willingly participate in criminal acts regardless of the laws or any restraint of society. The vast majority of people are somewhere between – basically honest, but occasionally in need of rules, regulations and the spectre of consequences in order to be on their best behaviour. That’s where an Integrity Commissioner fits in – he or she is not the fire department, but rather the smoke detector - a useful tool in avoiding major disasters.

Case in point: In 1994, I lost an election by 23 votes for a seat on the Peel Board of Education. My opponent, using a loophole in the Election Act, managed to nominate a phantom candidate with a fake name to run ahead of me on the ballot. Since the first person listed on the ballot gets up to 10% of the vote (people who don’t know a candidate often select the top name automatically) the vote was split such that I came in second. The fake candidate garnered 7.5% of the vote. At the time, I objected strenuously and as a result, charges were laid. It took two years to make its way through court, costing the participants and the public at least a half million dollars in today’s money. All this could have been avoided had a simple procedure been in place – a rule requiring all candidates show identification when registering to run for office. In the end, I was appointed Trustee and the election laws were changed. In the four elections since then, every one must show identification before becoming a candidate.

Had there been an Integrity Commissioner in place at this time, this matter could have been resolved before it became a full-blown court case. Similarly, having an Integrity Commissioner adds some clout to all the existing rules and regulations, helping Councillors to avoid mistakes or in some cases, casting enough of a jaundiced eye to bring someone into line, if necessary.

In my adult life, I can recall at least five Mississauga cases of political misconduct ranging from a relatively minor conflict of interest through to outright criminal behaviour. Given that there are, at any time about 35 local, federal and provincial politicians in office, having five reportable incidents over all these years may not seem like many, but I would suggest it is five too many! Public officials operate with public money and occupy a unique position of trust. Practices that may be part of the private business world such as receiving bonuses, commissions, profit sharing etc. are not part of public service. A few politicians are tempted when they see people all around them making “lots of money”. Greed, entitlement or plain envy sometimes feeds into bad decision making, with predictable results. Your editorial of November 6, 1996, “The Lesson Learned” (Trustee Election) summed it up well. *“Finally, and it may be the toughest lesson to learn, that power is addictive, and easy to abuse. But, if you do abuse it, eventually you will be caught. So now all is well in the world of politics in Mississauga. At least until the next time.”*

That’s why we need all the tools we can get, including an in-house Integrity Commissioner. At least until the next time.....

All the best,

George Carlson
Councillor, Ward 11