

Good evening to you all.

We are here to discuss the most substantive change to our Civic Procedure since 1985 - thirty eight years, and I have anticipated this moment ever since Mayor Angus Read, sat at the head of the table, gavel in hand, and proclaimed a change from the then existing system of Committees. I was there and have been opposed to the system ever since.

He wanted to run Cobourg like a business, but as a career Army Officer he couldn't, he knew man-management and delegation. He really didn't understand business. He could try to speed decisions up. He felt that the existing Committee system was holding back business by miring applications in Committees. By delegating one of "his team" to a specific portfolio of interest he could eliminate a level of discussion. But he unleashed a beast.

1 min

That beast was a combination of uninformed councillors and silos of information. As a result when topics came to the first level of discussion; the Committee of the whole (CoW) meetings dragged on as uninformed councillors grappled with the lack of information whilst trying to make a decision. The lack of good information prevailed because often Agenda topics were not presented in advance or because adequate coordinator reports were not always available. I suspect that even today, that situation still occurs.

Looking at the proposal in detail I want to congratulate the writers for their outstanding paper. On the surface it works - but for whom?

I have two principles of local governance;

1. *that the Citizenry should be involved in the decision-making at all levels of discussion.* Given that; the proposal needs a lot of work.
2. The second principle of local democracy; *that all decision-makers should have all the information before them in order to make an informed decision*, this one definitely needs work.

2 min

There are five parts to the proposal:

1. Four Committees, four meetings all in one week or two meetings over two weeks
 - a. 3 members; Mayor, Deputy Mayor and 1 Councillor
2. No CoW
3. No Advisory Committees
4. Council meeting once a month

The idea of four Standing Committees is a good one as each Committee will confine similar topics to the same Committee, this will give a depth of discussion by the Councillors to each operating department of the Town. But having them all in one week or even two every two weeks would give the lie that Councillors have a full-time job and therefore deserve to be compensated accordingly - Councillors would only attend one Standing Committee meeting and a Regular Council meeting a month - two legislative meetings a month.

3min

I would like to suggest that the same work could be accomplished by having three Committees instead of four and have each meeting on the first three Mondays of the month and having a regular Meeting to ratify the Committee decisions on the last Monday of the month. This would provide a regularity for the public. "Council meets every Monday evening."

Three members on a Committee - Mayor, Deputy Mayor and one Councillor. If we look at the second principle of my paper "all councillors should have all the information when making decisions" it compares miserably. As one commentor on a local news blog wrote *"If only some Councillors (I believe that the report recommended only one Councillor + Mayor/Deputy Mayor) sit on a particular Standing Committee then only one Councillor will have heard the arguments pro/con for a particular decision. That will ensure that decisions are made with even less knowledge than the current scheme! Why would anyone think that to be an improvement?"*

4 min

The elimination of the Committee of the Whole is a big mistake. Just because it makes the Staff's job easier because of duplication of meetings and paperwork that is not a reason for not allowing an "informal discussion" of the Municipal Agenda by all of the Councillors at the same time. **The only way I could support the elimination of the CoW is if all Councillors sat on all Standing Committees.**

4 min

The CoW is now one of the only places where the Citizenry can make their opinions known to all of Council in one shot. It is also the place where the Citizens can present questions of any kind to their Councillors - in the Forum. Eliminating this meeting is not good 'public engagement'.

The elimination of the Advisory Committees is not a good idea and removes actual public engagement from the proposal.

5min

Advisory Committees are the links to public participation and the legitimacy of local decisions. Advisory Committees provide local expertise and knowledge of the issues that Council discuss. The elimination of Advisory Committees will stem the flow of

public information/expertise to Council and the elimination of Advisory Committees will further the perception that Council does not listen to the public, does not need the advice of the public and knows everything!

The proposal examines twelve similar Municipalities to Cobourg. Only one, The Town of Essex, has a small number of Advisory Committees - three, but it has fourteen other types of Committees. To eliminate all of our Advisory Committees and only have four Standing Committees would be making Ontario history, and not in a good way, if the Town wants good public engagement.

6min

In fact if one reads the proposal, very little is said about public engagement. The proposal refers to “engageCobourg”. This device, at the moment, is not regarded very well by the public. Online surveys have not really been successful as a feedback tool but often touted by Council as justification for some decisions. The issue of “Public Engagement” is worthy of an MBA module and from what I have seen in this proposal the topic is just mentioned as something Council and Staff should be working on.

It can be suggested that when reading this proposal ‘Governance’ and ‘Public Engagement’ are two separate items when in fact both should work together.

The only way to succeed in making both subjects work together is to build into the Governance system Public Engagement. That means Council has to engage with the Public as soon as possible in the decision-making process and keep in touch until the final decision.

7min

The proposal would allow a Citizen to appear as a delegation at a Standing Committee, but it is unclear if the same delegation can make the same argument again just before the final decision at a Regular Meeting. There is no opportunity, as there is at the moment, to ask questions of Council in open an open meeting. So if the proposal goes ahead as written the input of Citizens is much less than at the present.

Cobourg is not alone in struggling to refine Public Engagement there are plenty of opinions about it online. Start with the excellent paper written by Melihate Limani of UWO - “*Citizen Engagement in Budget Planning in Ontario Municipalities*”. That paper discusses the ways to have a participatory budgets - something that you folks tried, to your credit, but did you do any followup with the participants to gauge satisfaction with the process?

8 min

One Regular Council meeting a month. Now this is a recommendation that I support completely. If the Standing Committees consist of all of the Councillors then ratification

of a motion that has been thoroughly discussed should be a formality. Duplication of discussion is eliminated for all but the contentious items. However this meeting MUST remain at a time in the evening to allow the majority of the Citizens to observe Council in action.

Final points; I have read the proposal and am still convinced that as written the opportunity for public engagement and the use of the public experts in the Town is less than before.

It appears that efficiency is being put before participation. Just tell me how an engaged public will have more access to the structure than before - you have eliminated two levels of access - the advisory Committee and the Committee of the whole!

8 min

If it's believed there are barriers to participation what are they? Has anybody ever told any of you they have had have trouble talking to Councillors about a problem?

I heard a member of Council talk about a seven hour Committee of the Whole meeting a few weeks ago, do you think Regular Council meetings are going to be any shorter under this setup if you have councillors being asked to vote on a topic based on a report from a Committee they never attended?

You really don't know the answers, that is why you have asked us to tell you what we think. There are many gaps in this report, especially about the ways to engage the public - where is that plan?

9min

What is the next step for instance in your proposal? You said you wanted to engage participation from those who do not participate or rarely participate - how successful have you been?

Finally thank you for the opportunity to make these points and I must say that I am 100% behind you to kill the coordinator system, but this replacement needs a lot of work!