



OPINION COLUMN

But give good news stories the heave-ho

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star
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Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said he believes council must get down to the nitty-gritty, not waste precious time discussing matters he considers superfluous.

SAULT STE. MARIE - A city councillor recently told me he believes council's role is to govern, not to talk at length about how streets are snowplowed or to share good news stories at the beginning of a council meeting.

More time, Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said, needs to be spent on the important things that affect the lives of Saultites and help make the community a better place to live, work and play.

I've given some thought to his comments over the past week and, while I agree with him that we elect city council to govern, I believe that perhaps my definition of 'govern' expands over a broader brush than his.

I do agree that council meetings are not the right forum to share good news stories. There is no definition of govern that stretches that far.

Shoemaker is not happy with the process used to select individuals for boards and committees. He has always advocated that the process should be completed in a public forum, preserving the principles of openness and transparency within council. He doesn't believe the process used last week achieved those goals.

The process saw a committee of council meet behind closed doors, review applications of interested community members and select those believed would be appropriate for the job.

The names were then presented to council in private emails, along with the names of the unsuccessful applicants. Councillors were asked they had any questions, comments or concerns. Eventually, all was passed in open council.

For Shoemaker, the discussion shouldn't occur behind closed doors or, in this case, between emails. And, he believes, the process allows for just that.

Technically he's right, but that must also be balanced with the right of protecting the applicant's privacy, as required by the Municipal Freedom of Information and Privacy Act.

Shoemaker wanted the discussion on the process itself to continue but he was quickly shut down.

Where I take exception to Shoemaker's argument is surrounding the discussion council had on snow-plowing efforts.

No doubt, we are obsessed with weather and, in winter, snow-plowed roads and the ability to get around is paramount to Saultites.

The update from senior staff was informative and provided council and residents with good information.

While the discussion may have been on the lengthy side, with the same questions repeatedly asked by councillors, the role of municipal council is also to represent the public and consider the well-being and interests of the municipality. That too, is part of my definition of governing. Saultites would expect their councillor to ensure that the best service is being provided at the most efficient cost.

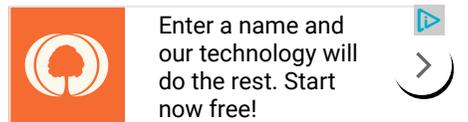
The argument can even be taken a step further. The Municipal Act states that a municipal government's role is also to develop and evaluate the policies and programs of the municipality and determine which services will be provided.

The discussion and questions by council did just that while senior staff were able to explain how the snow-plowing program for the city works, such as touching on priorities, workforce, equipment used and even costs.

More generally, as part of a municipal government, councillors guide the development of local priorities, set standards and are charged with overseeing the corporation in general. Discussion shouldn't be cut off if it is meaningful and relevant.

Council should be reminded that the Municipal Act states "as a councillor, you have a representative, a policy-making, and a stewardship role to play in your municipality. Often these roles will overlap. You will be called on to consider and make decisions on issues that will sometimes be complex and controversial. Most of those decisions will have long-term consequences for your municipality that extend beyond your four-year term of office, and should be made in the context of your municipality's directions for the long-term health and welfare of your community."

Let's not stifle good decision and debate.



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