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Opinion| Appointment to Sault Boards and Committees Requires Transparency



BY DOUG MILLROY ON OCTOBER 1, 2016

NORTHERN VOICES

I can understand Mayor Christian Provenzano having second thoughts about the year-old process of discussing the appointment of citizens to boards and committees in open council that he sparked in the first place.

"A few (people) didn't think the previous process worked so we changed it, but now we're finding the new process has some difficulties too," Provenzano told Elaine Della-Mattia of The Sault Star. "Some people are uncomfortable with their application spoken about in public and governance is important and we want to have the best people possible, with the right skills, on our boards and committees."

I supported the idea when it was initially proposed but I had some second thoughts myself after I watched the process play out in citizen appointments to the board of PUC Inc. in May of last year.

Larry Guerrero, chair of the PUC, and Mark Howson, a member, were in the running for reappointment but when the voting, which saw 15 applicants for seven board seats, was completed, they were only a couple of rungs up from the bottom.

Howson got somewhat of a leg up in that he was nominated for appointment to the Public Utilities Commission but Guerrero was unceremoniously dumped.

I found that rather cruel in that here was a man who had given yeoman service to the PUC over the years, being there when the PUC was turned into a city-owned corporation by council with instructions to make its way in the marketplace.

And he was there for the new corporation's first major battle in 2002 as city staff attempted to block its quest to replace the Ontario Clean Water Agency as operator of the city's waste-water facilities.

It was a battle the PUC eventually won, gaining council's approval, as well it should have. It would have been ludicrous for council to expect the PUC to go after the handling of other cities' water if it weren't prepared to let it handle ours.

However, having said that, I am not sure there is a better method of making such appointments as the one council is now

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Provenzano said while some boards require specific skills, he's not sure if it's a best practice to discuss an applicant's skills in the public forum.

As I see it, there really is no need for this to be discussed in open session; such a discussion could take place in closed session as it is when personnel issues are up for discussion. The voting would take place in open.

As it stands, as mandated by the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, no information other than the names of applicants has been released to public view to date. Yet when people run for elected office, everything is hung out there for all to see, including the results.

If Provenzano can get a mover and seconder for the notice of motion he has put together asking the city clerk to advise on how council should make its boards and committee appointments, it will be up for debate on Oct. 11.

Provenzano said council needs to hear from the clerk on how council can best select a skill-based board or committee so it can get the best governance possible.

"We need to take another run at it. The process we developed, in my view, doesn't work that well," he said.

I don't see a problem with council looking at the appointment process again, but I can't see why it would be handed off to the city clerk's office to do the legwork.

Surely all the information required is at hand, a committee, struck last year to examine the appointment process, having brought it from behind closed doors to voting on the applicants in open council.

Coun. Matthew Shoemaker, who sat on the committee that recommended the present process, said a number of systems were examined and the committee cherry-picked the best parts of those that were out there.

However, he said he would support a resolution to determine if improvements can be made.

"It would have to be pretty good to outdo our current system," he said.

Shoemaker, you may recall, back in December 2014 couldn't get a seconder, even from the mayor, whose idea it actually was, for a motion proposing that council, in a move toward openness and transparency, break with the past and make appointments to boards and commissions in open session.

But two months later, Ward 6 Councillors Ross Romano and Joe Krmpotich presented a resolution drafted by Provenzano which called for the appointment of a committee to review how other communities appoint boards and committee members.

In the meantime, council determined it would make any new appointments to boards and committees during open council meetings, the very thing it couldn't even bring itself to discuss two months earlier.

Shoemaker, whose voice was muffled in December but got pretty well everything he had wanted under the mayor's resolution, and Romano were appointed to serve on the committee, along with city clerk Malcolm White

A lot is being made of the need for skill-based boards and I believe voting on members in open session goes a long way toward ensuring that.

Brenda Davies was a board member of Algoma Public Health in 2014, just prior to everything in the health agency hitting the fan, the resignation of Medical Officer of Health Kim Barker and the forced resignations of board chair March Bruni, a councillor, and three others coming about in early 2015.

Although her relationship with Bruni had soured, Davies applied for reappointment for 2015.

Born and raised in the Sault, Davies started and ended her working career at APH, with 24 years in public health in Middlesex-London-Peel Health Department and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit in between.

Skills based? Should be a shoo-in.

She was not reappointed, all appointments for that year being made in closed session before council's decision to go public.

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Whatever changes are proposed or made to the present system, I sincerely hope that they don't allow what happened to Davies – and thus to the community – to ever happen again.

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David J • 2 hours ago

While appointments should not only be transparent but seem to be transparent, I can't help but question how some committees are struck in the first place. Councillor Shoemaker seems to get appointed to a lot of committees, often ones he proposes to be needed.

I feel there needs to be more citizen involvement in local government. Councillors may be our elected representatives, but I'm not convinced they seek the public's input often enough.

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