

POT HOLES TO POLICY

This presentation was given at the Municipal Orientation 2001 session on June 14, 2001 by Allan Gillmor, former Mayor of the Town of St. Stephen {edited for typos/grammar MJB}

Donald Crieghton, the historian has stated that, "History is the record of an encounter between character and circumstance..." You are the character, you are elected, your performance and your role, as part of the team, can have a great effect upon the future of your community.

You undoubtedly were elected to office with all kinds of ideas and vision, provided by yourself and your electors. This is good. Renewal is usually good, as long as it reflects the good of the whole community. If you have an axe to grind, your tenure will probably be short lived. You are not the sole decision maker, you are part of a team.

THE COUNCILLOR AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Other members of that team have opinions as important as yours. Be prepared to listen. The Maritime Municipal Training and Development Board has prepared a booklet entitled "A Guide to Government in New Brunswick". This booklet makes the following six suggestions:

- **Be tolerant of the diverse opinions expressed by other councillors**
- **Get as much information as possible on the issues**
- **Remove personal feelings and biases from your decision as much as possible**
- **Focus on the issues and facts, not the personalities**
- **Be prepared to modify your judgement as new information is provided**
- **Be willing to consider and discuss alternatives**

Politics, no matter what the level, is about **COMPROMISE**. If you can't change an opinion or position, you are in the wrong business. The willingness of a councillor to reason and cooperate with one another, leads to the development of a positive, achievement-oriented council. A "heels dug in approach" usually results in the expenditure of wasted energy. Energy that could be better focused on developing and implementing policy that could drive your community to its betterment.

When you were sworn in as a Councillor or Mayor you gave up some of your rights as a citizen. Sure you have the right and responsibility to express your opinion and the opinions of your constituents at the council table, but remember decisions are made by majority. Once a position has been adopted by resolution, that is a corporate decision, it no longer is open for discussion or criticism. In fact many councils have policies giving the right and responsibility

for advising the public about a decision to the Mayor alone. Now is no longer the time to be “free wheeling”. Solicit opinions and ideas before, not after the fact.

Once a position or policy has been adopted, give staff the time and resources to carry out that decision. It is not the role of a councillor to execute most decisions. If after sufficient time and resources have been allocated to the action and you are not satisfied, you don't go to your friends and neighbors complaining, you discuss the issue with the Mayor and/or the Manager. Determine the reasons for the delay - if not satisfied it should be revisited at the council table.

By the same token, you do not deal directly with staff, in asking them to carry out action. If there has been prior approval by council, either by policy or by resolution, a simple call to the manager should result in minor problems being corrected. Remember “Pot Hole to Policy”, if the appropriate policies and resolutions are in place, many small matters can be funneled directly through the manager for correction or improvement, such as minor street repairs, sign replacement or the resolution of a complaint that has come to a councillor.

BUILDING THE COUNCIL TEAM

So far it would seem that you do not have much to say in the operation of the municipality, but as a member of the Council Team, you do set the priorities for the community. How is this done? From my experience, it is not done piecemeal, it is done through planning. My Councils have used the “retreat” approach to allow for the interaction of ideas.

At least once a year, usually in the Fall, a day is set aside at which time all Council members assemble away from contact with other distractions. Leave the cell phone home. Don't make other appointments for later that night, for the session will usually extend beyond the planned time. Indulge yourself in a comfortable setting, with good food.

An agenda, with supporting documents and information has been prepared beforehand with topic input from all of council. Department heads and other resource people are scheduled to appear when relevant topics are to be discussed, then dismissed. Don't allow yourself to become bogged down in details, these can be worked out later. By day's end, you should have a plan for the year ahead. It may be necessary to carry some topics over to another session due to lack of time. Consensus building is the mode used during this exercise. When matters come up at committee meetings during the year, a consensus has already been developed, it's now a matter of refining the action or actions. This type of team building can only happen if all members of the team are present. If for some reason a councillor can't be present, the retreat has to be rescheduled to accommodate all.

One of Aesop's fables tells about an intelligent framer with a quarrelsome family. He gathers the family together and asks each family member to break a bundle of sticks he has bound together tightly with twine. They find it impossible to break the bound bundle apart. Now he separates the bundle and asks each family member to break each of the sticks. The sticks are broken into two pieces very easily. Councils that have bound themselves by consensus building, will work well producing great things for their community. As individuals, Councillors will accomplish very little.

In a team, it has to be recognized that there is a leader. In the Council situation, the leader is the Mayor, he or she is the recognized leader. The Mayor has been recognized by the community, at election time, and the Council must accept and respect this. The Mayor is more than a figurehead, he presides over and directs all the meetings. If a committee structure is used, he is the person who appoints the committee members. He or she is an ex-officio member of all Council Committees, he or she has opinions and he or she must be kept in the know. The Mayor is the acknowledged representative of Council at community functions. It is the Mayor who develops direction for the community in consultation with all of council. The Mayor has a special relationship with his staff, a privilege that does not extend to other council members. The Mayor and Manager should meet as often as possible to determine whether the direction of council has been carried out.

AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Many new Councillors will arrive at the Council table with ideas on how to fix everything. In New Brunswick the role and authority of Council is defined by the Municipalities Act, which we know is presently under review. There has been little change since the Byrne Commission recommendations were implemented in 1967. For its day, the definitions of municipal and provincial powers were revolutionary, and these recommendations have since been used as a model in other jurisdictions.

Municipalities were assigned "property services" while the province retained "people services". It has always been my philosophy to adhere to these divisions, especially during this time of "downloading" from other levels of government. For the record, "people services" of Provincial responsibilities are justice, education, welfare and public health. Don't be drawn into providing these provincially mandated services, go no further than being an advocate that these services be adequately carried out in your community, **DON'T ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY** for any of these. Your own responsibilities will demand enough of your time and finances.

- **Drainage**
- **Fire protection**
- **Police protection**
- **Garbage collection and disposal**
- **Sewerage**
- **Sidewalks**
- **Roads and streets**
- **Regulating traffic**
- **Community planning**
- **Street lighting**
- **Water**
- **Parks**
- **Recreation**
- **Tourism**
- **Industrial Development and Promotion**
- **Urban redevelopment**

You are not restricted to this list, but I think your financial resources will limit how far you can go beyond these, you are mandated to provide the protective services such as fire and police.

THE COUNCIL AND THE COMMUNITY

In the last twenty-one years, of which I have served eighteen of them at the Council table, what I consider to be the greatest accomplishment, has been the involvement of the community in developing direction. If a major project is contemplated, involve the community in the conceptual development, not necessarily the details. If the community takes ownership, there is no stopping the development.

There are two examples which I would like to relate, that have been successful in St. Stephen, involving input from the community at large. The first was the St. Stephen Plans of Action, which resulted in public meetings calling for community input, followed by a working non-council committee, that met over a two year period, working out an economic path for the community. Council accepted, in whole, the recommendations of this group and concentrated on implementation of those recommendations. Although there was much detail, the recommendations were simple: downtown revitalization, business park development and community pride. Pride in community being the most important. If you don't feel good about yourself, you can hardly sell your community to yourself or others...

Another project which involved community participation was waterfront development, part of the revitalized downtown scheme mentioned previously. Traffic issues, tourist attractions, beautification, pedestrian movement and the development of a town square, all were topics discussed and acted upon in a series of workshops hosted by the Town. Most of the recommendations have been carried out in a community that has taken ownership.

Don't act in isolation from the community that elected you, but do expect to make responsible decisions. The Canadian tradition is one of "responsible" government not "representative" government. You are in the best position to make the decisions if you do your homework. At the council table it is your job to make the decisions, it is not time to sit on the fence or grandstand. If the electorate doesn't like what is happening, I am positive they will let you know at the next election.

Community participation is best done by participation in workshops and on ad hoc committees struck for particular purposes. Community members can participate in standing committees of the municipality such as the BIA, PAC, Industrial Development Boards, Arena Boards, Library Boards, Beautification Committees and others, all of which must have some way of liaison with Council. Council must respect their concerns and advice, hopefully ready to implement reasonable recommendations. The citizen, who only criticizes, doesn't hold much of a role on the community scene. Respect for criticism must be earned by citizen's participation.

Last, but by no way least, keep the media informed about what is happening and the decisions that are pending. It is much better to have the support of the media than by being confronted by them.

CONCLUSION

Just a few more thoughts on the council process.

Conflict of interest is defined as a *situation in which a public official has a private or personal interest sufficient to influence or to appear to influence the objective exercise of his/her official duties*, or more specifically in the political sense, as resulting in monetary gain for the elected official or his family. Make sure that you remove yourself from discussions and decisions where there is **PERCEIVED** to be conflict of interest.

In a small community such as mine, the committee process works well, for it allows councillors to thoroughly express their opinions in a semi-private forum away from the pressure of public scrutiny. All recommendations must be ratified at the regular council meeting. My councils have encouraged all councillors to participate in committee meetings, whether a member of that

committee or not, everyone is in the know. It may be necessary to limit the degree of participation of non-committee members.

Always start Council and committee meetings on time. Be punctual. Another person's time is as important as yours.

Whether at committee or at full council meetings allow everyone to participate. As a councillor or mayor don't dominate the conversation. Others may not be as articulate as yourself, but here opinion is important.

In no way have I dealt with all the situations that you will encounter over the next three years, but hopefully I have provided you with a little insight, based on experience or longevity. The first year will be a learning year, going through the fiscal cycle. Respect the opinions of those who have been there before, but remember it is you that can introduce a new breeze onto the scene.

Thank you