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Becoming a Councillor is more complex these days

By: Vivien Fleisher

Halton Region held a special, free evening presentation at Oakville City Hall for all would-be candidates eyeing the upcoming municipal elections. Speaker and expert, municipal lawyer Fred Dean, at times felt compelled to explain that he wasn't trying to discourage anyone from running, but after he got through the volumes of information on what's involved, it did sound a little overwhelming, partly because of some looming changes.

The first half of the two-hour session focused on the nuts and bolts of council—who's who, who does what, and so on, plus the role of municipal government. The underlying advice was to become fully informed and never lose sight of the collaborative nature of the job. Not only did he want prospective candidates to remember that aspect, he warned that anyone acting in an inappropriate—uncivil, micromanaging, etc.—manner would likely run afoul of the integrity commis-

sioner (IC) who must be appointed by all municipal governments province-wide by next March. Code of conduct issues used to be discretionary within municipalities. Now the IC will make recommendations, and the penalty will range from a reprimand to a loss of 90 days of remuneration and can be appealed to the provincial ombudsman who must determine if the IC did an appropriate investigation. Because of this, the IC will both educate public and



Halton Regional Councillor Clark Somerville and Halton Hills Ward 1 Councillor Mike Albano at an info session on running for council.

council, and train on codes of conduct.

The night you win will be an amazing ego-boost, according to Dean, after which the reality hits: people will treat you differently from

that day until the end of term, they won't hesitate to call at all hours, and everything you say to people carries weight. He said you must understand you are a community leader, and some people may even try to bait you. The key person to navigate in those early days is the municipal clerk, who knows procedural bylaw well and is at every council meeting. Media training is important, as you have to define and deliver your key message. Dean says Henry Kissinger once quipped to the media, "Who has questions for my answers?"

The rules around pecuniary interests have been expanded, but perhaps the most sobering example is the Safe Drinking Water Act of 2002, created after Walkerton. The Province put everything in place except for one section: people within the organization must meet a standard of care, and the decision makers are council and senior staff. The province didn't impose personal liability on council until 2013. This means individual councillors have



EARTH WEEK: Eager to contribute to making their community a better place, Kyra Bingham and Lindsey Chapman of the 2nd Acton Girl Guides decided to pick-up trash while walking between No Frills and Tanners Dr. on Monday. Each girl collected a full black garbage bag while cleaning up most of the litter in the walkway. - Submitted photo

to know how their water system operates, use many checks and balances, and seek out independent auditors. In a nutshell, the level of responsibility on individual councillors is ramping up.

In closing, Dean re-

minded the audience that municipal government is complex and technical, but fun as well. Ascending to office is interesting in that it gives you the chance to do things that directly impact your community and

make a difference. His advice is to know what you were elected to do, talk to municipal staff ahead of time, be aware and prepared for changes coming March 2019, and talk to your family.

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