

12

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EDITORIAL

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Cramahe Twp. council off to a rocky start

If Cramahe Township council's first attempt at employee management is any indication, this council is in for a rocky term of office.

In the first week of December, a decision was made to hire a new Director of Public Works. The move would result in a reduction of duties for the current roads superintendents. That, by itself, is not necessarily a poor decision. More than one successful candidate for office stated that there were too many supervisors for the number of employees. But the way the councillors accomplished their goal cannot be condoned.

In his run for the top job, mayoral candidate Lee Dekeyser promised open government. The circumstances surrounding this decision were anything but that as he continued to obfuscate.

It is assumed the decision to demote 25-year veteran Jim Black and 18-year Cramahe employee Brian Williams was made by all members of council in a closed session. It was not made at any public meeting, so there was no record of where each member of council stood on the decision until the mayor's statement in a Tuesday interview following the council meeting. Nor was the decision made public after the two superintendents were informed of the township decision.

Mayor Dekeyser would not even admit

that it was a done deal in an interview on December 28, preferring to say that they "have not been demoted yet".

While technically that is correct, both men had their proposed duties explained to them and received buyout packages to supplement reduced wages.

According to the mayor, they were told of the possible decision during Christmas week. That statement was not corroborated by the supers who claim they were told early in December by township Chief Administration Officer Merlin Dewing. In the December 28 interview, Mayor Dekeyser stated he would be issuing a press release, probably at the first of the new year.

While council's right to hold closed sessions on matters relating to staffing issues must be respected, its decision to withhold this decision from the public cannot be for so long. Once the people affected have been informed, the people who pay taxes within the community have the right to know, particularly when the decision marks a significant change in direction for the municipality.

And that isn't the only questionable issue related to this decision.

Why is council going this way? Is it to save money? Can that be shown? Can it be demonstrated that there are people available who are qualified to fill this multi-faceted post? None of these ques-

tions was outlined in a timely way.

Former Mayor Jim Williams suggested that it might be years before this kind of change might result in a saving. In the meantime, a supervisor four years from retirement and another with a young family find their future incomes diminished.

By the decision to demote these men, Council would appear to be increasing its work force by two. But both supers regularly take a hand in daily works crew activities now. And they are not paid for extra work done in off hours. Demoting them will not increase the labour pool significantly. Adding a new supervisor to oversee sewage, water and roads won't either, but it will cost.

The township is offering \$55-63,000 in its advertisement for the new Works Director's position. That's what council will pay if it can find someone with all the qualifications who is willing to relocate. Three people consulted by the Chronicle on that account suggested that there are few people who can fill the needs mandated by the Province in roads, sewage and in water management.

And the decision doesn't explain why the township would take over water management when the potential liability issues are so great.

Both men were hurt by council's decision and the way it was handled. These

are salaried staff who are on call and willingly work in their off hours without pay. They were repaid for their career loyalty to the municipality with a decision made without consultation in the weeks before Christmas. It has left them and their staff with low morale at a time when we need them most to clear snow from the roads at all hours.

Change is to be expected. But it must be managed carefully and with consultation. One would have thought that Council might have learned that when it had to backtrack on the decision regarding use of the Keeler lands earlier in 2003. Obviously, it hasn't.

This decision was bungled. Whether it is in the long-term interest of the township or not remains to be seen. Regardless, this council has trampled on its staff and abused its position of privilege with its taxpayers by not keeping them informed when this decision was made.

To the mayor's credit, he came out last weekend and issued a statement surrounding the situation. In it he stated, "Council and the two superintendents should have sat down and talked about this to know what we are thinking. Things get confused and it's not fair to the men or to council." He has promised a report from council on staffing and council's direction "as soon as possible".

Let's hope he gets it right this time.