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Playing Ball With The Press

By William E. Doole

(EDITOR'S NOTE: We believe that the following article, reprinted from "Civic Administration," a Maclean Hunter publication, will be of interest to the large number of our readers who are unable to attend council meetings and who look to the press for full reports of what their elected representatives are doing on their behalf.)

Incidentally, it seems like a good time for the liberal to express appreciation of the situation which exists in this area and to say "thanks" to those municipal councils and appointed officers whose co-operation has been, at all times, of outstanding quality. That co-operation has played a great part in enabling this paper to present to its readers a full and complete picture of municipal affairs.)

One of the most important and sometimes misunderstood men in your community is the fellow who sits at the local press table. His is one of the box seats of democracy. He gets a closer look at the roots of democratic government than his colleagues in the parliamentary press gallery at Ottawa.

And yet sometimes, through failure of town fathers to recognize properly his privileges and responsibilities, the local editor is handicapped or prevented from doing his best job of community service.

Fortunately, most Canadian communities have been favored by top-notch teamwork between press and administration. Emporia, Kansas, a small U.S. city, became internationally famous through the writings of weekly Editor William Allen White. Hundreds of Canadian villages and towns have been brought into the national limelight by their hometown papers.

Names like George James and his Canadian Statesman immediately ring up Bowmanville, Ont.; Lang Sands and his Abbotsford, B. C.; News; Bob Giles and his Lachute, Que.; Watchman; the late J. D. McKenna and his Kings County Record in Sussex, N.B.; Frank Burns and his Kentville, N.S.; Advertiser; Albert Bergeron and his Western Star in Corner Brook, Nfld.; Alfred Walcott and his Valleyfield, Que.; Le Progress; Werden Leavens and his Bolton, Ont.; Enterprise. And so on. The list is almost limitless.

The point of our story, though, is this: If you're a new member of council, or if you're in a new and growing municipality which has just seen the establishment of its first local paper, how should you treat the press table? What does the local editor expect from you?

To get firsthand information, we put it up to Ray Silver, energetic young publisher of the Etobicoke (Ont.) Press. Silver has been doing such a job of publicizing the township of Etobicoke, that even the neighboring metropolitan dailies in Toronto have been sitting up and taking notice.

Boosts Community
Through the efforts of Silver and his newspaper there are few Torontonians who haven't heard that Etobicoke is one of Ontario's three fastest-growing municipalities; that 1,300 families moved into new homes there last year; that \$17 millions worth of building permits were issued during 1948.

Covering the 36 square miles of Etobicoke is a big job. It's a township that ranges from a sparsely settled agricultural north to a heavily populated industrial south. Ray says he couldn't do the job he's doing if it weren't for the close co-operation backed by the municipal administration.

Here's Publisher Silver's suggestions to any municipality that wants to help its newspaper do the best possible job in the interests of the whole community:

"Don't cut off your only effective contact with all the local population. Realize that your local press is listening on behalf of all the ratepayers. You need neither shout nor whisper. Plain talk — with facts, not generalities — is the best way to get ahead.

"You can usually rely on the judgment and knowledge of the local editor. Chances are he's probably been in close touch with municipal affairs longer than you have. His files have a longer and more accurate memory.

"The local editor may be a nuisance who calls your home at odd hours, but he's a close friend when it's necessary to explain to thousands of homes why a water shortage

or blocked roads are beyond council's control."

Information Needed
Silver claims the things that cause most ill feeling among ratepayers are rumors and lack of information. "Newspapers can explain complicated community facts in black and white in a way that people can understand them," he says.

No council chamber could hold all the constituents — even if they all wanted to attend meetings — and that's where the press table comes in, the Etobicoke editor points out. "But the man at the press table doesn't classify himself as a person with special privileges; he's there as an observer for the ratepayers."

Silver is emphatically opposed to "off-the-record" statements. "Councilors shouldn't embarrass the local press by asking them to delete things. On the other hand, councilors should remember that local editors are ratepayers themselves and are reasonably well informed on civic affairs.

"For example, I wouldn't reveal the site proposed for a municipal building, until the deal was closed. Otherwise, it would jeopardize chances of the municipality buying it at a reasonable figure. Nor would I write a story about a water shortage, unless the facts were sufficient to provoke fear. One isolated case of typhoid fever given undue prominence might set off a typhoid scare.

Facts Promote Understanding
"A candid attitude with the local press will give people sufficient facts to promote understanding and pave the way for co-operation, and at the same time prevent rumors and wild distortions. Honest municipal officials have no reason to fear public knowledge of facts."

Most newsmen who've gone beyond the cub stage won't offend or embarrass contacts. They have enough sense not to quote civic employees on matters of policy.

Editor Silver, in the main, regards Etobicoke's administration as being quite co-operative.

"I've covered municipal affairs in Windsor, London, Leamington, Kingsville, Sudbury and Toronto," says Silver, whose idea for a paper of his own came to him while he was an RCAF prisoner-of-war in Germany, "and I can honestly say that I've found Etobicoke councilors more conscientiously concerned and better informed than anywhere else I've been. They are inclined to be a little too fussy with little details and to putter around with them until the small hours of the morning — but maybe that's a good fault."

Silver considers Dr. W. K. Fenton, longtime MOH for Etobicoke, one of the township's most publicity-wise men... publicity-wise in the sense that he makes full use of newspaper co-operation in promoting various health schemes, and accident prevention campaigns.

Model For Ontario
He has among other things established a public health nursing service which for two years has been a model in Ontario. Provincial Government officials at Queen's Park send other municipalities out to study Etobicoke's setup. Dr. Fenton successfully campaigned for the appointment of sanitary engineers and gets good attendance at his prenatal and well-baby clinics through adequate publicity. Throughout the year, the Etobicoke Press, in co-operation with the MOH, carries weekly stories on health and conservation and accident prevention.

Considerable longterm publicity was given to the MOH's drive for sanitary restaurant conditions. Every restaurant operator in Etobicoke has been given expert instruction on sanitation control through a campaign which has included newspaper stories and pictures, and bacteriological experiments conducted in the restaurants. At a special "Food Handlers' Night" conducted by Dr. Fenton, the "difference between hash-slinging and proper serving of food" was dramatized in everyday language.

The Etobicoke Press has done outstanding work in the interpretation of the township's master plan, a complicated legal instrument for dividing the township into zones, green belts, etc. The paper has helped to sell the plan to the ratepayers.

Must Be Re-sold
"What council and the township planning board have succeeded in selling residents, must be continually

resold to successive administrations." Silver points out. "That's where the file or morgue of a local newspaper with its long and accurate memory can perform a real service."
Silver, of course, doesn't pretend that he's licked every angle involved in the relations between municipal corporations and the press. Nor does he lay claim to be the shining example of perfection for all to follow.
But he does claim, and with some justification, that a spirit of co-operation and understanding among members of the local press and the municipal administration pays off for both sides — and for the citizens of the community.

SALE REGISTERS

SATURDAY, JULY 23, 1949 — Auction Sale of large building lot, Club House and lawn equipment, known as the Unionville Bowling Green, on Maple Ave., Unionville, Ont. Sale at 1:30 p.m. Ken & Clarke Prentice, Auctioneers.

THURSDAY, JULY 28, 1949 — Important auction sale of Guernsey Cattle, Farmall A Tractor, entire Farm Stock, Implements, Standing Grain and Corn, Baled Hay, etc., on Lot 11, Con. 8, King Twp. Property belonging to Bert Ross. Sale at 1 p.m. sharp. Terms cash. No reserve, ill health causing sale. Ken & Clarke Prentice, Auctioneers.

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