



THE REGION: Seven years after release of damning report, management practices still in turmoil

Council still mired in inefficiencies

BY LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITER

The land deal controversy that

ruined the career of former York engineering commissioner Bob Hodgson only scratched the surface of the turmoil plaguing the region.

The saga that led to Hodgson's dismissal seven years ago set the stage for a damning administrative review known as the Berkeley report.

Last week, Hodgson won an \$880,000 libel suit against the Globe and Mail, which broke the story in March 1991. In the story, Hodgson was falsely accused of misleading York Region council into paying developer Alfredo DeGasperis — whom the Globe erroneously referred to as Hodgson's longtime friend — \$783,500 for land in Richmond Hill that the region should

have received for free, Hodgson argued he saved taxpayers up to \$700,000 because the region didn't pay full market value for the land.

Although regional council concluded Hodgson had done nothing wrong, he was fired anyway. He was eventually paid \$214,000 to settle a wrongful dismissal lawsuit.

Following the incident, council hired the Berkeley Consulting Group to review the region's administrative structure. The \$77,000 report, released in September 1991, found the Hodgson controversy was only the beginning of the region's problems.

At the heart of the trouble was the parochial approach of regional councillors, who put their local interests ahead of the region's.

Berkeley also found:

- Councillors had little time or energy for regional issues.
- The region was rife with political and administrative conflict, including power struggles between chairperson Eldred King and chief administrator Bob Forhan.

- There was little staff accountability.
- A skeleton staff was suffering from work overload.

However, former Aurora mayor John West and former East Gwillimbury mayor Bob Featherstonhaugh, who helped steer the region through the painful investigation, insist little has changed seven years later.

"There was so much overlapping of authority and nobody knew who was doing what half the time," West said.

There have been many changes at the region since the days when it was run by an old boys' club,

Featherstonhaugh said.

But he believes many of the Berkeley recommendations have been sitting on a shelf, gathering dust. "I really don't know if it changed anything. I know they're a lot more polished. Certainly, individual staff pay more attention to dotting their Is and crossing their Ts."

But regional CAO Alan Wells, who was deputy CAO in 1991, insists the region has acted on many of the recommendations.

"I think something as outrageous and uncertain as that (Hodgson) issue wouldn't happen again," he said. "Some of the issues around land acquisition policies are much clearer, and reporting to council is much clearer."

Wells acknowledged that with little direction from council and a lack of accountability, commissioners were able to run their departments like their own kingdoms.

But he said things have changed. "We now have a management team. Reports are reviewed by each other."

A report earlier this year by consultant Deloitte and Touche highlighted a number of problems with the computer services department.

"With the exception of a few individuals, the computer services department suffers from too much responsibility and an over-burdening workload," the report said, adding many employees lack the appropriate skills to perform their jobs effectively.

Meanwhile, West pointed out one of the first Berkeley recommendations council acted on was splitting the engineering department in two, with one commissioner overseeing transportation and a second responsible for environmental services.

With York experiencing significant development, as it is again today, Berkeley found one commissioner couldn't handle the duties of a single department. But for the past few years, Kees Schipper has been commissioner of both transportation and environmental services.

Markham Mayor Don Cousens, chairperson of the region's finance and administration committee, argued it made sense to divide the duties while roles were being defined. But he supports an amalgamated department.

Cousens said while the region has made progress since the Berkeley recommendations, he admitted there are

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The advertisement for the



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that appeared in the July 7th Markham Economist & Sun, Stouffville Tribune, Richmond Hill Liberal & Newmarket/Aurora Era Banner should have read: We are willing to meet, negotiate and seek resolutions with or without a Conciliator, unlike the Board which failed to show on June 29th because the Board's chief negotiator was away on holidays.

We apologize to the York Catholic Teachers for this error.



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