

## MOST YORK REGION MAYORS ACCEPT CAMPAIGN DONATIONS FROM DEVELOPERS ... SHOULD THEY DO THAT?



**DON COUSENS:** Markham mayor accepts donations from developers, saying, "I do not feel obligated by any donation because the amount of all contributions is quite small."



**WAYNE EMMERSON:** Whitchurch-Stouffville mayor said it makes no difference who donates to his campaign — his community's planning is already completed.



**BILL BELL:** Richmond Hill mayor said it's ridiculous to think anyone could be influenced by \$750. "Will you sell your soul for \$750? I won't," he said.



**MARGARET BLACK:** King mayor advises her campaign team not to take contributions from developers. But a developer bought a table at a fundraising dinner. "Should I have said they shouldn't come?"



**TOM TAYLOR:** Newmarket mayor, who is the only York Region mayor to be acclaimed in 2000, does not and never has accepted developers' donations. "I feel it is extremely difficult to distance yourself from an objective decision."

# Where do the campaign dollars come from?

*When developers donate to municipal candidates' campaigns, the perception on the part of the public isn't a good one*

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN  
Staff Writer

Some do, some don't.

But most York Region mayors say anyone who believes developers can buy off a municipal politician with a \$750 campaign donation must think they come pretty cheap.

"Will you sell your soul for \$750? I won't," said Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell.

For years municipal politicians have dealt with the community-based perception that if they do accept campaign contributions from developers or development companies, they end up owing them a favour or two down the road. As development in the region grows at a record pace, so has that perception and, over the years, many politicians have been accused of being in developers' pockets.

"I understand that perception exists," said Bell. "The media feeds on it and makes a frenzy out of it, but there is provincial legislation that governs contributions and recognizes possible abuse. That's why there's a \$750 limit."

No donation, whether from an individual or company, can exceed \$750. All candidates must record donations accepted and file them with the town clerk, who then makes the list public, albeit months after the election.

Municipal election donations are not tax deductible in York Region, but every municipality has the right to pass its own bylaw to

address tax deductions or exemptions. In Ontario, only Toronto and Ajax have done so.

Mayors can spend a maximum of \$5,500 on their campaigns, plus 50 cents per elector. Councillors may spend \$3,500, plus 50 cents for each voter in their ward.

For this article, eight of York Region's nine mayors were asked the same questions: Do you accept campaign donations from developers or development companies? And why or why not? Vaughan Mayor Lorna Jackson could not be reached for comment on this issue.

Bell does accept such donations, but said he goes out of his way not to solicit funds from anyone involved in the development of the Oak Ridges Moraine, a current hot issue.

"Money filters in sometimes and you don't know if it's from a particular developer," he added.

King Township Mayor Margaret Black makes the same point.

"I advise my campaign team not to take contributions from developers," Black said. "But last election, for example, Club Link, which has its headquarters in King, bought a table at a fundraiser — should I have said they couldn't come?"

She added the Schickedanz Brothers, both farmers and developers, have regularly contributed to numerous political campaigns over the years.

"They have the most beautiful horse farm in the township and are long-time residents. Do I say no? I don't know," she said. "But we would not take funds from a

Greenpark or a Fred DeGasperis."

Black said her background as a lawyer and the fact her family has lived in the area almost 200 years has always made her very careful.

"When I leave politics, I'm back in law," she said. "I'm not going to compromise myself or my children and I have never been in the pocket of any developer. That's not the kind of person I am and that's it."

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Markham Mayor Don Cousens said, in all his years in politics, there has been only one time someone who donated to his campaign has come back to him for a favour.

"He asked for something I felt was outside the boundaries of propriety," Cousens recalled. "I dealt with it quickly and speedily and returned the money. It actually ended the relationship."

Cousens said he'll accept campaign funds from anyone, including developers.

"I do not feel obligated by any donation because the amount of all contributions is quite small. It's ridiculous to think we can be bought for \$750," he said.

Aurora Mayor Tim Jones agrees. "I'll accept donations from anyone who would like to give to me, the same way I'll accept votes from

anyone who would like to vote for me, whether it's a developer or anyone else," Jones said. "I put everyone in the same pot."

Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson said it doesn't matter who contributes to his campaign — the town's secondary plan, regulating growth and development, is final.

"All the planning is done, with residents' support and we're not going outside it until 2021," he said. "It was passed one year ago and can't be changed for five years at least. That will take us to the next election. I have no problem here whatsoever."

Vaughan Mayor Lorna Jackson said, while she accepts donations from anyone interested in supporting her campaign, she doesn't even look at her contributors' list.

"I must say I don't get a great deal of money, I only collect what I really need," she said. "I don't even look at who they are — I accept them blind. I don't know and I don't care."

Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi said he doesn't accept contributions from developers because residents could get the wrong idea.

"We're not collecting money while there's a perceived problem out there or an opponent who might make an issue of it," he said. "I've heard it door to door, if we accept money from a developer, it's like we're being paid off."

In Newmarket, Mayor Tom Taylor has never accepted money from developers — in fact, he won't accept money from companies or lobby groups or community organi-

## AT A GLANCE

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In York Region, such donations are not tax deductible. Each municipality, however, may pass its own bylaw addressing deductions or exemptions. Toronto has such a bylaw.

zations at all.

"I'm not criticizing what other people do, but I feel it's extremely difficult to distance yourself from an objective decision," Taylor said.

Fraser Nelson of Metrus Developments is the chairperson for the York Region branch of the Urban Development Institute.

He said the UDI does not have a policy on campaign contributions. But Metrus routinely donates to various campaigns, he said.

"We have a corporate position that, if we're asked, we'll contribute. We contribute to people I don't even know. Some may win, some may lose," Nelson said. "We do it because it helps the democratic process and the democratic process costs money."

He said he has never worried about the perception that donations may influence candidates.

"If there is that perception out there, I'm puzzled by it. There's the \$750 cap and, at the end of day, I suspect no politician is going to be influenced by \$750."

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