



Talk Of The Town

Smear Campaign Plain Wrong On Funding Reveals no evidence of wrongdoing

By Ben Embiricos

As you read this you will know the result of the town election, but due to *Free Press* deadlines, as I write this I do not. This might have presented me with a problem but for the fact that many town political issues live on whatever the result of elections. Whether it is appropriate for municipal political campaigns to be funded by the property development and construction industries is one such issue and was the subject of my article back in May.

The source of mayoral candidates' campaign funds was a major issue in debates leading up to the 2006 election. This time around the subject did not raise its head until the *Tribune* ran its story on 13 October about the "anonymous brown envelope campaign" being directed at Mayor Wayne Emmerson. Back in August this newspaper was sent one of the envelopes. As it contained no evidence of any wrongdoing by anyone and had been sent anonymously we decided that the right thing to do was to simply ignore it.

Since that time the package has received wider attention so it seems right at this stage to enter the fray.

The sender of the envelope alleges that Mr. Emmerson had breached the Ontario laws on campaign finance contributions in the run up to the 2006 election by taking too large a contribution from a group of companies that they believed were owned by the property developers and builders Schickendanz Brothers. The other allegations centre upon Mr. Emmerson's purchase and sale of two homes on the Schickendanz-owned Ballantrae Golf and Country Club.

There is nothing in the package which proves any wrongdoing in relation to the houses, however it is on the campaign finance allegations that I wish to concentrate.

I can say for sure that Mr. Emmerson did nothing wrong in accepting the

\$5,000 contribution from the seven companies based at the Willowdale head offices of Schickendanz Brothers. The law places the responsibility to not pay too much to election campaigns on the contributors and not the politician. There are good reasons for this.

Firstly the campaign funding laws on when companies are associated and when they are not are complex (they borrow the sixteen page definition from the Income Tax Act). It is also nigh impossible for candidates to know for sure who owns the shares in private companies because unlike in some countries (such as England) there is no publicly accessible record.

There is no evidence that the Schickendanz companies breached the campaign finance laws but the point is that even if Mr. Emmerson's 2006 campaign took too much money from them, the breach would be theirs and not Mr. Emmerson's. He has no case to answer on this allegation. Any suggestion that he does stems from a misunderstanding of the law.

The 2006 campaign finance papers filed by the candidates with the town clerk show that the two candidates who obtained between them 77 percent of the votes (Emmerson and Sherban) both received significant campaign contributions from the development and construction industries. This is the same in most Ontario municipalities.

During the 2010 to 2014 term some of the lands along the Stouffville Road between Ringwood and Gormley will come under development pressure as the Oak Ridges Moraine Act comes up for review. Property developers have been purchasing land along the road in expectation. Where Ontario Green Belt land is opened up for development it is largely for two reasons, firstly the reliance of municipalities on property taxes for their revenue and secondly the strong demand for land, particularly from home buyers wishing to move from more urban

parts of the GTA.

Seen from this standpoint the exact levels of campaign contributions should not distract us too much from the wider issues. If we want to preserve our green spaces we need political and economic fixes. For example, giving the municipalities an alternative revenue source – such as a share of sales taxes, so that there is not the temptation to develop just to pay the bills. Secondly introducing economic policies at Provincial and Federal levels which promote economic growth in population centres other than the GTA.

Personally I am not a fan of public subsidies for individual companies or business sectors (policies favoured by Dalton McGuinty) wherever they are located. However infrastructure investment for example in a faster and better regional rail network would help the whole Ontario economy. It would also allow more of the extremely rapid GTA population growth to be diverted to centres such as Kingston, London, Barrie, Guelph, Kitchener and the like. This would mean less pressure on the GTA green belt as a whole.

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