

On The Town

Where is the public input?

By Pam Mandich

Sometimes council meetings are boring, especially since most council members prefer not to speak on any issue most of the time. It's hard to stay interested when the majority of what happens is just the administration of the meeting without much discussion of agenda items. But sometimes council meetings appear to be a well-rehearsed play, with all the actors knowing their roles and performing them well. The Nov. 6 meeting was one of the latter.

At the end of the council in committee meeting, Mayor Emmerson gave a long speech about how some of the public and some of the media (read me) do not seem to understand what a Municipal Class Environmental Assessment (EA) is all about. He went on to say that an EA is a chance for the public to have some input into how municipal infrastructure projects are carried out.

It seems that those in attendance at the EAs for the new town operations centre and the elimination of the Ninth Line jog do not seem to understand this process. When people start asking political questions and wanting political answers, what they want is a public meeting, not an EA.

At the end of the mayor's speech, right on cue, CAO David Cash suggested that staff might put together a report on the EA process to give the public a better understanding. Councillor Hargrave completed the mini-play by suggesting that the report be published in the newspaper for the public to read.

The report was presented on the agenda for the Nov. 20 meeting. If the intent was to make the EA process understandable to the general public, it failed miserably. First, the report is written in that dense, dry gov-

ernmentese that has the same effect on the body as eating a large meal – it makes it difficult to stay awake. If you do manage to stay awake long enough to read the report, you won't necessarily understand it.

For instance, class environmental assessments, such as the one being done for the operations centre, are described as "those projects which are approved subject to compliance with an approved class environmental assessment process with respect to a class of undertakings." If anyone out there understands what this means, please call, write or email me, because it makes no sense to me. Second, I am at a loss to understand why public money (i.e. taxes) would be spent on staff time to produce a report for public information that few will read, and the few that do will not understand.

Third, the issue is not that the public does not understand the EA process; the issue is that the public feels impotent and frustrated when political decisions that affect their lives directly are made without their input. People raise political questions at the EA meetings because they see it as their first public opportunity to do so.

And while the EA is presented to get their feedback on how to proceed with a project, for many it is the project itself they are questioning, not how it is done. While it is true that anyone can be a delegation to council to state their concerns, it is equally true that nine times out of ten, council will simply accept a delegation without comment. The EA may be their only chance to get a direct answer to their questions.

On Nov. 6, Mayor Emmerson stated that while he was standing at the back of the room during the operations centre EA, the meeting was held specifically by the consultants to get pub-

lic feedback and to help them address any concerns raised. He also said that he remained behind to answer any questions that individuals may have had. That may be true, but a private conversation with an individual or two is not the same as a public statement made to a large group of voters.

I should point out that while the EA is called to get public input into how a municipal project will be carried out, there are no rules that state political questions cannot be asked or political questions cannot be answered by the politicians who may be present. In fact, at the previous EA meeting held for the operations centre, Councillor Smith had no problem facing an obviously upset group of people to explain why the political decision to locate the operations centre on Bethesda Road was made.

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Nineteen on the Park! fundraiser a huge success

An Evening in Wine Country, which took place at Willow Springs Winery Nov. 8, kicked off the fundraising campaign for the restoration of 19 Civic Avenue. The event raised close to \$300,000, which represents a third of the current campaign goal.

A hundred and fifty people were in attendance, including newly-elected local MPP Helena Jaczek. Funds were raised through live and silent auctions, and financial donations were received

from Smart Centres and Geranium Corporation, Cassels, Brock and Blackwell, and Bigioni LLP, as well as the mayor's charity golf tournament.

Nineteen Civic Avenue, one of the oldest and most culturally significant buildings in the downtown core, will serve as a community arts and culture centre. Information about future fundraisers will be posted online at townofws.com/nineteen.asp.

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