Expert outlines what it takes to run for council



Municipal lawyer and coach Fred Dean tells an audience of potential municipal election candidates they should prepare for four years of life in the public eye. He hosted an information centre for those hoping to run in partnership with the Hastings County Clerks and Treasurers Association April 24 at the Dungannon Recreation Centre. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

Running for council means loving meetings, lots of reading and committing both you and your family to four years of public life, according to municipal lawyer and coach **Fred Dean**. He suggests if you plan to run for council, you'd best read the job description.

?The day after the election you're going to feel like the greatest person? all these people voted for me? That's not going to last,? Dean said at the Dungannon Recreation Centre April 24. He attended on behalf of the Hastings County Clerks and Treasurers Association to host an information session for those hoping to be elected this October.

Parking at the centre was hard to find, but Dean set a sobering mood.

?People in local municipalities tend to be really nice people who want to solve all kinds of problems. You can't do it,? he said. He was there to talk about municipalities' roles and policies, their duty to accountability and transparency and how that affected each councillor.

First off, Dean asked the public to name off 50 responsibilities of local governments from roads to official planning for the future. He asked the audience to think of another 50 on their way home because, he said, there were ?way more? than 100.

?If you're on council there is no expectation that you'll be experts on any of these,? he said. That's what municipal staff are there for: experts in building, planning, works and more, he said.

Dean cautioned against micromanagement of municipal staff. He suggested he had seen municipal departments and councils disrupted to the point of uselessness due to the micromanagement of staff by members of council.

Pointing out a slide in his presentation with an Osborne and Gaebler Reinventing Government quote, Dean said staff was in place to advise council and make recommendations. The quote read, ?Council should steer the boat rather than row it.? Dean said he hadn't heard it better said in his more than 30 years of experience.

?If you're on the same page [with staff], in my experience, things are going pretty well,? he said. He pointed out that a CAO was meant for day-to-day management of staff and the head of council was meant to ?champion and cheerlead? for the community.

Councillors are expected to be community leaders as well, Dean said, the best way to do this is to be prepared. He asked the public where council got its information listing with them other municipalities, conferences, staff, the ?coffee shop,? the internet, committees and local boards.

Council members should also be aware of provincial acts that hold them accountable for the wellbeing of their constituents, such as the Safe Drinking Water Act, 2002. He noted reading agendas and reports before each council meeting also came with the gig.

Dean said each member of council should also be aware of council policies and procedures from notices to accountability, transparency and harassment. He recommended asking the municipal clerk for copies of council documents or help to understand them.

This reading would help potential new councillors get up to speed in a hurry, he said.

Dean said he recommends council members take harassment training twice over the course of their terms. He suggested harassment claims are taken seriously by the province. This also goes for conflict of interest and council integrity where, as of March 1, 2019, council codes of conduct will be mandatory and citizen complaints against municipalities will no longer be paid out of the plaintiff's pocket, but out of the municipality's.

?If you're thinking of running on a single issue, think it through really carefully,? Dean warned. It's possible to be passionate about an issue, but be unable to make the change you're hoping for once on council.

?You need to be aware that every conversation you have you are having that as a public official,? he said. He explained it's important to declare your pecuniary interests in council ? those that directly or indirectly affect you or your family.

The public won't only treat a councillor differently when he or she is elected, he said, but his or her family as well. Council members have to balance municipal life and family life, he said, ?municipal life takes a lot of time.?

?If you wake up at three in the morning and you are a council member, I can guarantee you it will be about council business,? said Dean. He said council ?confidentiality stretches and includes spouses.?

Asked if a council member could have a full-time job as well, Dean said it was possible. ?There are things you can do to reduce time? Respect that people have lives,? he said.

Despite the obvious extraordinary commitment he laid out, Dean maintained ?it's a wonderful opportunity.? He encouraged people to run and even said it could be ?a lot of fun.?

Nominations for the 2018 municipal election opened May 1. They'll close by the end of July. Those interested in campaigning can contact their municipalities for nomination requirements and details.