

Open wide, please

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft town council recently made a major decision, involving hundreds of thousands of dollars. They decided to take over the town's recycling operations, which are now contracted out.

It appears that the decision was financially sound. But determining that hasn't exactly been easy ? in large part, because the decision was essentially taken in private, behind closed doors.

Ontario legislation permits municipalities to decide whether they want an agenda item to be discussed in closed session. Ostensibly, they have to have a compelling reason. The only items that absolutely require a closed meeting are requests under the Freedom of Information Act, or a request to disclose information about a threat to public safety (e.g., a potential terrorist attack)

Municipalities can close a session for other reasons: labour negotiations, potential lawsuits, land acquisition, or personal matters about an identifiable individual, such as a town employee. The logic for closure here is easy to understand.

However, deciding to spend more than \$300,000 of taxpayer money would seem to be a matter which should take place in full public view. But it didn't. The claim was that cost estimates would be given for components of the change which might prevent the town getting lower bids. However every year, in its budget, the town estimates publicly what the cost might be for road repairs or other capital works. Also consider: if you're a bidder who's seen an estimated cost, your competitive impulse would be to bid below that figure, not above it.

Unfortunately, the inclination of governments everywhere is much like that of the Wizard of Oz: don't let the people see what's going on behind the curtain.

Certainly this is true in the large federal and provincial bureaucracies. But local government is so 'close to the ground,' operating services which touch citizens directly, immediately, and daily ? roads, sewers, sidewalks, garbage collection ? that it should be the most transparent level of government.

That's why I was disturbed at the tone taken by Greenview Environmental, the town's engineering consultants on the project. When they came to council to report on what had been done, they did not have copies of their slideshow for the media. When I asked later for this presentation, and for figures showing a direct comparison between what was being spent now compared to expected costs with the town take-over, I was told the town would issue a press release. When the release came out, it was from Greenview, and it didn't have any financial data - although there were statements from the CAO and a councillor about what a wonderful project it was. In short, it wasn't information; it was 'spin.'

Persisting, I asked the Greenview officer for the financial data. He e-mailed back that the council package had numbers (the package that the press never received) and that the data there and in the press release 'represents the information that the Town of Bancroft has communicated to media outlets at this time.' He concluded by stating: 'We trust that you will find this information sufficient for your work. We will contact you when additional information about the project has been prepared for distribution to the public.'

In other words, don't ask questions; we'll tell you what we think you need to know when we feel that you (and the public) should know it.

Eventually, with the assistance of the mayor and some other councillors, I found most of the information I was seeking. The current contract costs the town about \$185,000 a year net, with fees expected to increase. It appears that the costs of the town taking over the service will be about \$50,000 a year in operational costs (possibly more, possibly less), plus about \$30,000 to 50,000 a year over 10 years for the renovations to the town waste site. So the town should save money. Mind you, this is an extrapolation from incomplete and confusing data.

So why the trouble getting a straight-up cost comparison? Is it fear of embarrassment if the numbers are off later?

Attempts to hide painful financial information are understandable. But when it does come out, the damage can be greater. To cite two such embarrassing recent surprises: the one million dollars' worth of unfunded liabilities, and the half million annual deficit on the town sewers.

In the end, it's all taxpayers' money, and they have a right to know as much as possible in order to make judgments on whether they're getting value for their dollars. Surely it is in the public interest to get the public involved. Look at how much ?outside? citizens have brought to the solution of the sewer problem.

In September, town council is getting a briefing on privacy and transparency issues. After that, it is supposed to set a definite guideline on open versus closed meetings. Let's hope that closed meetings become the rare exception, not a standard part of every council meeting.