

Area rate restores community power

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The Ottawa Citizen

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Judging by the reaction to two recent columns about citizens' dissatisfaction with big city government, there is a considerable appetite for more local decision making in Ottawa. City councillor Peter Hume is promoting an idea that could return a measure of control to the city's neighborhoods.

The mechanism is an area rate, a little known, but potentially powerful tool that lets communities -- not city hall -- determine spending priorities.

Now, when a community need is identified, it's up to the councillor to lobby city staff and his council colleagues and hope the project will out-compete others vying for a limited pot of city money.

Sometimes it works, many other times communities' needs aren't met. Under the area-rate plan, a community identifies a need and a willingness to pay for it. The city can then go ahead with the project, paying for it by adding the money to neighbourhood residents' taxes over a multi-year period.



CREDIT: Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen

The area rate is already working in Peter Hume's Alta Vista ward on community centre upgrades.

The area rate is already working in Hume's Alta Vista ward. In 2005, Hume and people in the Canterbury area wanted to expand and upgrade the Canterbury Community Centre, a nearly-40-year-old complex. The goal was to provide more meeting rooms, air conditioning, and office space for community sports teams. While the \$2.5-million project was fairly modest, it would have taken 10 to 15 years to rise to the top of the city's capital spending list, says Hume.

Instead of waiting, residents, the community association and a coalition of sports groups decided to bear most of the cost themselves. The community association and sports groups donated \$350,000 to the project, and \$1.45 million will come from a special levy that will cost area homeowners about \$10 a year for 10 years. The city paid the rest from development charges.

The beauty of this area-rate mechanism is that the city already has the power to levy the rate on any area it wants to define. There is no need to beg Queen's Park for new rules and wait years for results. It's an important power, but Hume is the only city councillor to have used it.

The area rate can cover much more than just capital projects. As examples, Hume suggests that people in Kanata might favour an area rate to restore the public flowers and greenery the area was noted for, before amalgamation. People in Rockcliffe are concerned with the area's heritage character and might want to hire their own planner to focus on their community's interests. Councillor Marianne Wilkinson reports that people in the Beaverbrook area are considering an area rate to pay for special street signs that the city won't replace.

Besides control of priorities, direct community payment adds an element of cost control that is absent from the city's general capital budget, where vast sums are spent on things the public doesn't know much about and has no ability to monitor. The limit on the community's contribution kept cost inflation under control in the Canterbury project.

One of the issues with an area rate is how to define the area involved. The good thing is that it can be defined as broadly or narrowly as a community wants. If you want a better play structure in a neighbourhood park, the group benefiting and paying would be small. If people in the former Nepean, for example, wanted a new hockey rink, the area rate could be applied to all homes in the former community.

Defining the favoured community projects and getting the public involved would provide new work for our community associations and give those important grassroots organizations a truly meaningful role in the city. Instead of begging city councillors to advocate for their top projects, the community associations would be telling councillors what people are willing to pay for. This ability to produce real results would give citizens another reason to get involved with their community associations.

If the area rate were to be widely adopted, some would object because areas that are more well-to-do could afford more improvements than poorer areas. The fact that the Canterbury community can raise nearly \$1.5 million at a modest annual average cost of \$10 a home suggests that local action should be affordable in any neighbourhood.

Yes, it would be taxes on top of taxes, but your already substantial taxes mostly pay for basic city services and major capital projects. There isn't much left for the small things that enhance a community.

The area rate won't return the measure of control that people had in the small municipalities that were amalgamated to form Ottawa, but it's a way to give citizens more say in the large city. All that's required is politicians and communities willing to act together.

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