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## Councillors push for special financial oversight committee

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There's a move a foot at city hall to bring greater oversight and accountability to management of the city's finances by creating a standing committee of councillors to do that - and that alone.

Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume is leading a drive to establish an audit and financial planning committee that would be responsible for keeping an eye on the bottom line.

Currently, different committees and groups of councillors are charged with different oversight functions, and Mr. Hume thinks this ineffective.

"I do not believe city council's current governance structures are strong enough to give deliberate, considerate and transparent reviews to matters related to the city's financial condition," Mr. Hume wrote in a memo on the issue recently.

Chief among his concerns is the decentralization of oversight currently in place.

The long-range financial planning committee meets irregularly and only to discuss big-picture issues. The audit group meets infrequently to see how well the bureaucracy is doing toward addressing issues raised by the auditor general.

And there's no system in place to measure the city's overall compliance with the recently approved fiscal framework, which is supposed to be like a "financial constitution."

The remedy Mr. Hume proposes would be a single group of councillors responsible for all of this meeting every two weeks, like all standing committees.

The group would deal with reports on the city's compliance with its framework, the yearly reports from the auditor general and his follow ups, long-term financial planning, and bring issues to council for full debate when warranted.

"This streamlining will improve transparency and strengthen city council's commitment to financial accountability and sustainability," Mr. Hume said.

He also said it would help the public understand the city's financial strengths and weakness better and give people more confidence in the way the city is managed.

The city's auditor general Alain Lalonde supports Mr. Hume's idea.

Currently, Mr. Lalonde and his group file yearly reports and recommendations on different aspects of the city. If staff agree with the recommendations, they are put in place. When there is a dispute, councillors on the audit working group essentially mediate a settlement.

In a letter to Mr. Hume on the issue, Mr. Lalonde said he thinks a new committee responsible for this and other financial matters is the way to go.

"I think the idea has a great deal of merit and would be in full support of council establishing such a committee," he said.

Mr. Hume has a little more fine tuning to do before he goes to council with his idea. However, he says the idea makes sense, is in the interest of the city and residents, and he will put it before council in the coming weeks.

"Oversight and accountability are just too spread out now, and all these things are inter-connected," he said. "If we have one group, focused on one thing, I think it would be more effective."

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