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Poetry in motions, of a sort

Dealmaker Hume saves portrait gallery bid, but Manotick sewer pipe vote a disappointment

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It looked as if city council would say yes to urban sprawl and no to downtown density yesterday, but a last-minute compromise engineered by Councillor Peter Hume helped his colleagues get one of two key decisions right.

Councillors found a way to support a developer's bid for the Portrait Gallery of Canada, but they didn't think as clearly when they approved the extension of a sewer pipe to Manotick. That project is a thinly disguised effort to guarantee a housing development that will turn the village into a reasonable-sized town.

The portrait gallery discussion didn't get off to a promising start when Councillor Clive Doucet expressed his views on the gallery in the form of a lengthy poem. To paraphrase, the gallery is a noble and wonderful thing that shouldn't be attached to some lousy condo building. Doucet's work was so inspirational that two other councillors responded with poems of their own.

Things didn't get any better when Councillor Diane Holmes, who represents the downtown, launched into a bitter, if accurate, attack on the stupidity of the whole portrait gallery process. At least she delivered her comments in prose.

It was a pity Prime Minister Stephen Harper wasn't in attendance. Not only is he clearly a guy who could use a laugh, but councillors' discussion would have been a useful reminder of just how bad his portrait gallery plan is.

Harper basically wants to extort money from cities and provinces to cover much of the cost of the national institution. It's quite a way to lead a country.

The main point, and councillors eventually got to it, is that the process is what it is and if Ottawa wants a crack at the gallery, it has to have a bid. What was required was someone willing to move beyond taking unproductive positions on the issue and actually broker a compromise. Hume worked out a deal with developer Claridge Homes that guarantees the condo building will go ahead even if the developer's bid for the portrait gallery fails. The space that would have gone to the gallery could be used for a community centre or city cultural use. It's doubtful the city has the money for that kind of project, but the deal means the developer will have to offer something of value to the city, even if it's only cash.

Councillors also returned to the Manotick sewer debate that they postponed two weeks ago, but they hadn't visibly advanced their knowledge of the issue in the intervening time. City staff had apparently been working hard to persuade councillors that extending a sewer pipe to the village was the cheapest and best alternative. Given the city's traditional preference for that kind of technology and the fact that millions of dollars have already been sunk into design work, it would have been surprising for staff to take any other approach.

Staff mounted a concerted attack on the effectiveness of a small, city-owned sewage

treatment plant in Manotick that uses technology from an Ottawa company called Seprotech. That company hadn't actually bid to serve the areas that want sewers, but staff found it useful as an example of the myriad flaws of any technology that doesn't involve a big pipe. Councillors were told that sewage is constantly being trucked out of the Manotick plant. Actually, it's twice a year. They were also erroneously told that a plant in Manotick would need lots of space because it's a smelly, industrial use. The Seprotech technology is intended to be built right into neighbourhoods.

The Ottawa company has used the Manotick plant to sell its technology to countries around the world, but councillors wouldn't know that and were content to rely on their staff's version of reality.

About the only gain from this debate was the promise of a study of alternative sewage treatment techniques, so maybe the city can do better the next time. City staffer Wayne Newell even held out the hope that this kind of treatment could be used in other areas of Manotick. Not likely, once the city puts the big pipe in and is looking for additional users to help share the cost.

City councillors should insist that the study be done by an unbiased outside expert. The quality of advice they are getting from their own staff leaves a lot to be desired.

Now that the big pipe is assured, so is the expansion of Manotick. The only question is when.

Watching council yesterday, one had to conclude that this is a tough city in which to do business. The people who want to develop the portrait gallery had to listen to councillors spout poetry, and a company with a leading technology for treating sewage got slammed so that another company's development plans can go ahead. And that was on a day that was, on balance, more successful than average.

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