



September 5, 2008

Being cute with funding doesn't fly with feds

By **SUSAN SHERRING**

Nice try.

No cigar.

Mayor Larry O'Brien, flush with newfound money from the federal and provincial governments, appears to be playing a little fast and loose with the cash.

But the feds aren't willing to go along with the game the way he'd like.

With much flourish, O'Brien announced on Wednesday that the city is committed to being a partner in a \$100-million program to clean up the Ottawa River.

Its seems loving the river is now sexy for politicians, and O'Brien clearly wants his share of the spotlight.

Could it be that Alta Vista Coun. Peter Hume has had too much attention from the mayor's perspective?

Hume, a smart politician who chairs the city's planning and environment committee, has a genuine interest in improving the state of the river and has played a leading role lately in finding ways to improve it.

Working hand-in-hand with federal Environment Minister John Baird, the two have met away from the prying eyes of the mayor's office to figure out how the two levels of government can work together to improve the Ottawa River.

If there's some good media attention along the way, so be it.

Happy to oblige.

So on Wednesday, O'Brien announced the city, the province and the feds are all contributing relatively equal shares of the \$100-million program to do their bit to fix some of the many problems contributing to the pollution problems with the river.

The problem is, under the plan coming out of the mayor's office, the province and the feds would be paying for sewer projects that are already completed or under way -- with about \$20 million already spent or committed by the city.

That's a no-no for the use of the federal government funding, with the Build Canada fund demanding the cash go to new projects.

The feds, under Baird's leadership, want real action, and thankfully, the fund doesn't go for projects that have already begun.

Sadly, the province has written a no-strings-attached cheque.

Local boy and Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Watson said the province isn't concerned if provincial money goes to a project already done.

"We're very pleased if a good portion of it is going (to the river). And if it means the city frees up money for other projects, we're not concerned," he said.

Mayoral assistant Brent Colbert said yesterday there's nothing wrong with the city using the partnership money to fund completed projects.

"We were expecting to go that project alone. It should have been a shared infrastructure project, and this will now reduce that amount."

So, the city pledged to complete a \$30-million infrastructure project to introduce a real-time control program to help stop the spillage of raw sewage into the Ottawa River, and now are only committing a couple more million than planned.

The feds and the province, on the other hand, with a little nudge from Hume, have committed more than \$30 million each.

"We're doing more, faster," Colbert said.

Hume is worried Ottawa is getting a bad reputation for taking advantage of shared funding.

Remember the fiasco when the city used funding from the province to get rid of its snow-removal deficit?

"In my opinion, it was the general agreement that this money was on a go-forward basis. It was clear we were matching money. In fact, council agreed (in July) to commit \$20 million of new money to match the feds' commitment. That certainly was not money we have already spent, and I think we're getting a very bad reputation," Hume said.

"Council's direction was a clear \$20 million in addition to what we were spending. I think this is trying to be cute with the numbers and we're going to get found out. I just don't think it's helpful, with all the goodwill that this effort has engendered. It just doesn't make any sense that we would do this," he said.

Comments like that, of course, are why Hume is considered a frontrunner for both helping to save the river and becoming a strong contender for the mayor's office.

He's still got the limelight.