

A Democratic Deficit

The disbandment debate in Temiskaming Shores has revealed a troubling democratic deficit on City Council.

In pursuing their agenda to eliminate the Temiskaming Shores Police Service and Dispatch Centre, Councillors Danny Whalen and Brian Hughes and their followers on Council continue to run full steam ahead without regard to the concerns and views of affected New Liskeard ratepayers.

First, on January 9, 2006, without any public consultation or consensus, Danny Whalen introduced a motion to disband the Temiskaming Shores Police Service and replace it with OPP service. If standard procedures had been followed, the public would have had two weeks to prepare a delegation and address Council about the misguided motion.

However, Brian Hughes moved that Notice of the disbandment motion be waived, leading to a quick 3-2 vote in favour of disbandment and denying New Liskeard ratepayers any say on the matter.

In response, New Liskeard residential and business ratepayers mobilized *Keep Our Police Service* (KOPS) to fight Council, while bringing all the facts and costs associated with the misguided disbandment motion to public attention.

Many ratepayers have now had the opportunity to address Council to highlight:

- a substantial reduction in cost for the Temiskaming Shores Police Service as a result of new annual police funding from the Government of Ontario
- the lower level of policing service for New Liskeard in the OPP contract proposal versus the current Temiskaming Shores Police Service
- up to \$1.1M in staff severance penalties to disband
- the loss of local and responsive fire, enhanced 911 and public works dispatch currently provided by the Temiskaming Shores Police Service Dispatch Centre
- the loss of local jobs;
- the fact local ratepayers are extremely satisfied with the current Temiskaming Shores Police Service and Dispatch Centre

Council should have researched all the facts and costs associated with disbandment before they introduced and voted on a motion. They did not. After hearing from concerned ratepayers who want to keep the Temiskaming Shores Police Service, Council continues to move forward with disbandment instead of respecting the people who pay for the service and stopping the process.

There have been several public appeals to allow New Liskeard residents and business owners to vote on the policing issue, with a full public debate, during the November municipal election. A referendum for New Liskeard residents because they face a reduction in policing service with disbandment. A referendum for New Liskeard residents because they accepted amalgamation and elected this Council on the condition that they keep their police service.

To date, Council has replied that public consultation or consent is unnecessary. Apparently, Councillors Whalen and Hughes know what is best for the community and will not let public concern or questioning stop them from their agenda.

A decision to disband or reduce a municipal police service must be approved by the Ontario Civilian Commission on Police Services (OCCPS). Council has suggested that if New Liskeard ratepayers do not agree with disbandment they can let OCCPS know at a future hearing.

Responsible councillors ask, listen to and act on behalf of voters and ratepayers, respecting the trust people have placed in them. This certainly has not been the case with the policing issue.

Democracy at the municipal level is not only about a vote every three years - which of course is this coming November – but also about local participation and consensus. Much has been said in recent years about the democratic deficit (or lack of accountable representation at the federal and provincial levels of government). But the current debate over disbandment, and issues like Council trying to rush through a sell-off of Haileybury waterfront property despite the objections of local residents, has highlighted a serious democratic deficit in Temiskaming Shores.

Council and local residents can work together to address the growing democratic deficit in Temiskaming Shores. Councillors can listen to local ratepayers, stop disbandment and focus their attention on real community priorities like infrastructure improvements and attracting new industries and jobs to the area. Residents can make a difference by watching and holding councillors accountable for their decisions.

After 43 years of quality, dedicated 24/7 community based policing to New Liskeard, KOPS will not let a few unresponsive councillors disband the Temiskaming Shores Police Service without a full, informed public debate and vote by affected ratepayers.

(This column first appeared in a community newspaper April 12, 2006)

For more information, or to get involved, please visit www.kops.ca