

A Rocky Start

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I don't envy the task of our new Caledon council. Voted in just as Bill 23 came into effect, and under the looming shadow of a previously discussed wage hike, their chances of 'looking great coming out of the gate' were slim. There was always bound to be some acrimony on the 24.4% increase and a meeting last week proved that assumption true. Faced also with massive scheduled (and provincially mandated but not provincially paid for) growth on Caledon's horizon, citizens were already unhappy about the potential paving over of our little piece of paradise and now that tax hikes look inevitable, we are even more likely to be upset that we, and not developers, have to pay for it. Caledon's Council is off to a rocky start and not necessarily one entirely of their own making.

Politics is always a bit of a dicey game. There will always be times when you are 'damned if you do and damned if you don't.' Any decision is almost always going to annoy at least some of the people you serve, some of the time. In the two cited examples, the problem about the decisions made is that they were not entirely within this Council's control. That only adds to the complexity of any task facing a public official. The proposed wage hike was put before council last year after what I understand to have been a Town staff report that recommended the increase as a means to bring Councillors in line with those serving in a similar role in other municipalities.

According to reports in this paper in July of 2022, the findings of a consultant report found Caledon's Mayor and Councillors were being paid below the 60th percentile compared to municipal counterparts. Together with the argument that ward boundaries, an increase in population and a reduction in Regional Councillors, it was recommended that salaries be increased to bring them more in line with what other municipalities pay their elected officials. Then, as now, Annette Groves and Tony Rosa opposed the motion but enough other Councillors voted in favour that economy and inflation be damned, the increase is a done deal.

Do I think Councillors should be paid appropriately for what they do? You betcha! These are your friends and neighbours, some with other full-time employment, who put their love of community where their mouth is in an effort to help make things better. They were the ones willing to put their name on a ballot, open themselves to ridicule and recognition in equal measure and to largely give up nights, weekends and a personal life for the next four years - all while living under a microscope. Sure, you might say, they signed up for this but I'm guessing it's a surprise to some just how much vitriol exists and a steep learning curve for others that everything you now do and say is a matter of public record? even those 'off the cuff' remarks. I don't have a thick enough skin for the job, that's for sure! Do I also think the Councillors could have handled this situation differently, however? Again - you betcha! Whether this raise was about equitable pay or not? a 24.4% increase during these difficult times is just a tad egregious. A more judicious approach would surely have been to phase in such a drastic pay increase over the four-year term of Council. This would have been a measured and reasonable response to what was a measured and reasonable investigation into equitable pay for equitable work. Caledon isn't, after all, going to grow overnight but growth is coming and no doubt it's fair to say Councillor workloads will increase.

Also at issue was an increase in the expense budget allocated to Councillors and it is also a significant jump. I'm not sure I agree with the expense amounts for which no receipts are required but with that said, every time your group, club or organization asks for a room rental fee to be waived, or a donation, or for a Councillor to attend a gala, recall that this money often comes from their own pocket, so a reasonable expense allowance is not without merit. Besides, I don't know about you but if I join my local Councillor for coffee to discuss a concern, I kind of expect them to buy the coffee.

As for tax hikes, paving of the greenbelt and significant growth, once again Council is in no real position to do anything differently than what their predecessors may have done. Bill 23 is a provincial mandate and while I hope Caledon is lobbying hard at the ROMA conference this week, I'm doubtful it will make a darn bit of difference. The loss of infrastructure money from developers has to be made up somehow, because of course, somehow we as residents still expect all the same, if not better, services as those we currently receive. That leaves our new council with the prospect of just two months into the job having to vote in a significant tax hike for residents. A rocky start indeed.

You may have noticed as this column progressed, an increase in the use of the word 'reasonable.' What I think is missing, most of all from these recent conversations and Council meetings, is an examination of what it means to be reasonable. Listening to the Council debate on this topic, some delegates were reasonable, others not so much. Some Councillor responses were reasonable, others not so much. What we actually need to see more of from both sides is a better effort at maintaining reason, dignity and respect while we all work together toward the common goal of a better Caledon.