

Being accountable and staying in touch

by MARK PAVILONS

Our elected officials are our voice in government.

They represent us, and act on our behalf.

At every level of government, our politicians and their staff work to ensure constituents have the services, programs, infrastructure and access they need to live and thrive.

Our system is created in such a way that we vote in our municipal, provincial and federal representatives every four years. During that relatively short period of time, they act as servants, watchdogs, policy-makers, movers and shakers. They are part of a larger team, whether it's at the local Council chambers, or in Parliament.

I have covered politics and elections in this province for more than 25 years and have seen many mayors, regional chairs, premiers and prime ministers come and go.

I have met many councillors, MPs and MPPs and have found the majority to be honest, decent folks, dedicated to their communities.

They say politics is one of the least forgiving professions. Some say the same for journalists!

And yes, it's often true. More often than not, politicians bear the brunt of residents' complaints, challenges, difficulties, strains and hurdles. Sometimes it's misplaced, and others it's bang on.

Citizens today, despite the vast amounts of information at their fingertips, still don't have a full grasp on who does what.

As a refresher, our municipal government collects your property taxes, but only gets to keep a little more than 20%. The lion's share goes to the regional level, and the remainder to the boards of education.

So with less than one-third of your tax dollars, the municipality has to look after local roads, facilities (arenas), trash pickup, fire services, snow removal, local programs, local planning, bylaw enforcement and more.

A portion of our income taxes goes to the provincial government, which looks after education, social services, environment, roads, law enforcement, planning, and more.

The other portion goes to the feds, who administer health, the military, airports, transportation, pensions, unemployment, and more.

Yes, it can be a daunting, complex, multi-tiered system, but it does work, despite the criticisms.

Politicians at all levels have a code of conducts and are held to very high standards. They are always under constant scrutiny.

That being said, our local politicians and councillors can be our best contacts and best friends.

I have found local councillors and staff to be the most accessible group I have ever encountered in my 30+ years in the journalism business.

Their doors are always open. They always return calls and emails. We work well together.

Kudos to former mayor Thompson and current Mayor Groves, and each and every soul who works to make Caledon the great place it is.

Many residents don't see it, but more than 100 people work behind the scenes the grease the wheels, and keep everything in sync. It's not always easy when faced with ever-changing, conflicting mandates from the Province.

Everyone was put to the test during the pandemic and thankfully, Caledon and its greater community rose to the challenge, came together and kept things running smoothly, in almost seamless fashion.

You can't ask for more.

All of this requires a cohesive and engaged citizenry. Luckily, we have that in spades in Caledon.

There has to be a willingness and enthusiasm for everyone to come together and work as a team. Again, we have that. While you can never please everyone all the time, or even most of the time, it's good to know our residents are solid as rocks.

The mayor, councillors and Town staff are visible and show up at almost every local event. You can't ask for more.

Good lessons for the newcomers on the newly elected council.

Municipal staffers are the trained experts in their fields and have likely been 'den mothers' and hand-holders to our elected officials.

Politicians toss around the terms accountability and transparency, but in our case, they ring true.

I sometimes get a call or email about some 'shady' business going on in town, or related to the municipality.

In all my years, I've only seen one or two legitimate cases of breach of trust or wrongdoing by a municipal official.

When it comes to communication, I believe Caledon is very responsive.

A case in point, email today tends to be the most convenient way to reach people, including our politicians.

However, my faith sinks when I get a response saying they are 'receiving hundreds of emails daily and we appreciate your patience as we respond to each inquiry.'

Hey, I get upwards of 200 emails per day, and I single-handedly go through each and every one of them. I respond almost immediately because I understand deadlines, etc.

Fortunately, I never receive such a note from anyone at Caledon. In fact, most of my inquiries are handled quickly and efficiently. If someone doesn't have the answer, they find someone who does.

From my point of view, that's all I can ask for.

Is everything perfect? No. Can things be improved? Of course.

But once your 'house is in order,' it's a lot easier to work towards even greater efficiency.

People pay a premium to live in Caledon.

My guess is it's worth it, considering the leadership you receive.