

The Cost of a Blank Cheque

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Recently, Caledon citizens were asked, indirectly mind you, to write a blank cheque to our CAO.

You may not have heard about it before today, however. Meanwhile, provincially, all Ontario residents are being asked to write a blank cheque to whichever party wins this entirely unnecessary provincial election. It's important that we all understand the consequences, and the costs, of writing a blank cheque against the future of our town and our province, as well as against the future generations who will inhabit these spaces long after we are gone.

We'll start locally. Perhaps you didn't even know that you were being asked to write a blank cheque. Called by the benign title, ?Amendment to Purchasing Bylaw No. 2019-24,? you might not have realized the potential costly implications to you as a taxpayer, for writing this cheque.

Let me explain further because even a review of the staff report on the matter, by which Council members are guided in making their decisions, doesn't really provide the full perspective.

Last week, Council was asked to support a motion to increase the amount our CAO could spend without coming to Council for approval. The staff report simply noted that ?Council approval is required to amend the Town's Purchasing Bylaw No. 2019-24, (because) changes in dollar value thresholds (are) required in order to effectively manage procurement needs.?

Largely left out were important details like what the current dollar value is, and what the increased amount would be should the amendment have passed unchallenged. If you don't have time to watch the proceedings, I recommend keeping an eye out for any articles written elsewhere in this publication that might provide a more fulsome overview. In the meantime, however, here's the highlight reel.

The true cost of the blank cheque taxpayers are being asked to write to the Town of Caledon, for expenditures under the direct, and final approval of our CAO, is a million bucks. Ya, you read that right. The current spending limit for non-standard procurements and single and sole-sourced contracts without having to come to Council for approval is \$50,000. The sparsely worded amendment was attempting to have that limit raised to a whopping one million dollars under the sole purview of CAO Nathan Hyde, who reports solely to Mayor Annette Groves. We might be a growing municipality ? the main argument for the requested increase ? but sole-sourced contracts worth up to a million dollars, entered into without Council approval and at the sole discretion of only one (or potentially) two people? That's just irresponsible. Council members act on our behalf to ensure taxpayer funds are spent responsibly. We're grateful to the four Council members who questioned the cost of writing such a large blank cheque and fought to have the amount reduced.

Provincially, it's going to be a little harder to assign any kind of true dollar value to the cost of writing any political party a blank cheque which, let's face it, is effectively what we are doing when we elect a party into office. We're saying collectively, as tax paying citizens, that we trust the reigning party to spend our dollars wisely, in the best interests of all citizens, not just any potential donors or developer friends. Perhaps voters would think more wisely about the choices made in the ballot box if they were literally picturing an actual dollar figure written on one of those giant cheques typically seen during donation announcements. After all, as taxpayers, what are we willing to ?donate? to the livability and sustainability of our province moving forward?

Even though one party chose to capitalize on the angst caused by threats from our neighbours to the south in order to call an election, I think we need to think more locally about the mandate we are giving the next provincial government.

What will be the true cost of building an unnecessary highway (413) or the fictional tunnel under the 401 that I made reference to last week? Certainly in the billions of dollars and when compared to the costs of simply opening up the 407 to truck use at reduced

or eliminated tolls, we might actually be talking about savings instead. Such savings could then be used to write a more important, and desperately needed cheque to our health care system, funding hospitals and family doctors ? both areas that require a significant boost.

As an added bonus, removing truck traffic from some of our busiest highways might also help to alleviate some of the dangers posed by another pressing problem, the lack of oversight and related costs of the carnage caused by largely privatizing truck training that has led to rampant abuse. We can't even estimate a figure for that particular blank cheque because how does one place a value on human life?

Finally, what do we say to future generations about the costs of losing greenbelt lands, building quarries across Caledon when we already have more gravel (and pits) than we'll need for the next 100 years combined with the irreparable costs to the environment and species at risk potentially harmed by all this development? How do we look our grandchildren in the eye and admit that we willingly wrote a blank cheque to the government to decimate farmland, (potentially leading to enormous food costs) to drastically reducing or eliminating wetlands (resulting in large scale, untold harmful changes to the ecological and evolutionary order of nature) and to putting our own self-interests ahead of their potential for an economically sound and secure future?

Blank cheques are a costly endeavour. A cost we might not realize the full consequences of until it is way too late to void, delete or cancel them. Checks (not cheques) and balances are put in place to ensure we don't overspend without sober second thought. Locally, that means Council, elected by the taxpayers, should be able to monitor large expenditures on our behalf, meaning that the CAO (reporting directly to the Mayor) is not solely responsible for spending a million dollars without some level of oversight. Provincially, it's you and I who need to provide that oversight through the electoral process.

When you cast your ballot this February 27th, picture a giant blank cheque. What's the number you're willing to spend when measured against some of the very real consequences shared here?