

## Size Does Matter

Soon our City Council will decide to “right size” itself. This is on the Council agenda for Tuesday and from everything I hear, they are going to suggest moving from 23 to 20 councillors. Once again, a compromise position for our city.

When citizens are asked if we should have a smaller council to govern our city, the question is usually asked in a void – without a framework of what could be in place of what is, and how that would work. That, along with our shared attitude of “Let’s leave things they way they are”, and “It’s not that bad, is it?” or “Everyone else does it that way, so why should we be different?” .... leads us to compromise.

Compromise in this case is the token middle ground that puts off the hard decisions that we should be prepared to make. Compromise will mean that no one is really happy with the result, nor well served. Those who want the status quo are unhappy because change has been forced upon them; and those who want meaningful change are unhappy that the change is not enough. Compromise has its place. This isn’t one of them.

Everywhere I go, I hear that people are unhappy with the way in which the business of our city is conducted at Council. One of Nova Scotia’s largest employers, with an annual budget of nearly a Billion dollars, and yet there is never enough to do what needs to be done. We need to be top of our game if we want to maximize the asset we have in Halifax – for Nova Scotia and the entire region.

Appropriate, forward thinking and best practice governance is a powerful tool we can use. Appropriate size is a starting point for good governance.

When I bring up the discussion of a smaller council with the Mayor, he immediately goes to the “but it won’t save money” discussion. Maybe it won’t. But what it would do is create a framework that would require councilors to act differently. To move away from the “turf” approach we witness regularly, and govern our city as an integrated whole.

What I heard loud and clear from citizens at the public hearing that I attended was that citizens need to know their voice is heard and that there is a way to have their neighborhood issues addressed. At present, we do this the same way we have done for hundreds of years....by calling your councillor. While this is comfortable, it may not be best in today’s world. There are better, more effective and efficient, ways to ensure citizens have access and input to their city. Ways that will allow Council to focus on its real job: governing our city.

The Chamber has conducted research into the area of best practice municipal governance in Canada. What we found is that there is no “silver bullet” – there is a plethora of approaches across the country, although Halifax does land on the high side of councilors for the size of our population.

While it is prudent to check around to see what other cities are doing, we have a once-in-a-5-year opportunity to be leaders in the country with a visionary move to position Halifax. To be bold and strong, and show other cities what can be done, demonstrating the leadership our city deserves.

If we want to play, “Follow the Leader”, then let’s us be the Leader.

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