

Closing the Accountability Gap at City Hall

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"Thank you John for those kind words of introduction, and thank you TELUS for your sponsorship of the breakfast this morning.

Good Morning everyone, and thank you for inviting me to speak this morning.

At City Council's direction, three weeks ago, I brought forward a report to Council entitled: "Accountability, Governance and Communication at City Hall". It was a pretty straightforward document. It was a six-page action-plan. It recommended changes at City Hall. Changes to governance. Changes to accountability. Changes that will provide Calgarians with greater confidence in their Municipal Government.

Last month when this report came up, a one-vote majority of Council decided that they weren't ready to decide. So Council has tabled it. We'll be discussing it again on March 17th.

Much to my surprise, this six-page document caused quite a stir at City Hall. I've had some members of Council complain to the media about "the process". Some Aldermen seem to have forgotten that this plan was brought forward as a result of a unanimous decision of Council.

I've heard some talk about leadership. I've even heard one Alderman say that this six-page report set off her "spidey-senses". I'm still not quite sure what that means?

However, I found it interesting during debate on this report, not a single member of Council, including those who voted to table it, had anything negative to say about its contents.

Over the past three weeks, I have not made any public comments on this issue. I have been silent on this matter, until today.

My message today is simple: It's time for Council to stop talking about accountability. It's time for us to do something about it!

Every day that passes potentially puts us one day closer to an another situation like East Village, creeping up on us without warning. That put taxpayers dollars to risk. This is unacceptable.

It's troubling to see some of the recent comments in the newspapers - people saying this is a "deeply divided Council." I do think there are some problems causing division at City Hall.

Part of the problem has to do with our governance and the flow of information, but it's also due to Council, as a governing body. Council is becoming more indecisive. All members of Council, myself included, need to be more disciplined about making decisions. We need to take the information we have before us, debate it, and decide.

Too often these days, Council seems unwilling to make the call. I'll give you an example. We have been working on updating our Procedure Bylaw. It's basically a rulebook. It sets out how we do things. I'm sorry to say we have been working on it for a year now. Council has tabled it, not once, not twice, not three times, but four times. And we're not done yet. That's indecision...we can't even agree on our own set of rules.

Some people have come up to me and said, "Dave, relax. That's just the way government works. Government always takes a long time to make a decision."

What these people don't seem to recognize is that the decisions that government makes or the decisions that government doesn't make have implications for us all.

Calgarians entrust City Council with the responsibility to run this city. They entrust us with their money. We have a responsibility to close the accountability gap at City Hall as quickly as we can. Because when our City isn't operating as well as it should, all Calgarians are impacted.

Let me share with you a few more examples.

The East Village experience isn't just about a development deal. It's about a problem created by the Accountability Gap at City Hall. It's about taxpayer money. It's about real tax dollars being lost because a deal went sideways. And it's about further delaying new development in an area that desperately needs it.

Another example.

In November of last year, Council approved a City budget that places a higher than necessary tax burden on Calgarians.

It took our Finance Department staff 19,000 hours to prepare that budget. It took Council three weeks, and over 1,000 man-hours to debate it.

The process is backwards. Council should instead set clear budget guidelines and administration should bring forward realistic options to meet them.

Alderman Gord Lowe, Chairman of our Finance and Budget Committee, is spearheading an initiative to change this process for next year. I'm fully supportive of Alderman Lowe's efforts, and I commend him for his work on the issue.

One more example.

The Bow Valley Lands site where the General Hospital used to stand. The site has been ready for development to begin for months. So why no development?

Because Council requested reports from administration – reports on how to begin re-development on these lands. We've been waiting for these reports since last summer. And while we wait, this site is costing taxpayers \$38,000 a month.

These reports came to Council yesterday, and Council had 4 alternative scenarios to choose from. And do you know what happened? A majority of my Council colleagues opted for the scenario that is:

- Slowest
- Least transparent
- Offers the lowest return on taxpayer's investment
- And that is most open to political interference.

I remember voting against a process like this two years ago. It was called East Village. Council's decision on the Bow Valley Lands seems like déjà vu all over again. Given this decision, if there ever was a time to close the Accountability Gap at City Hall, it's NOW!

So how do we correct the problem?

I offered Council a plan for addressing Accountability and Governance shortcomings at City Hall. I have copies at the back of the room for your reference. It is a four-step process that offers a reasonable and practical fix to our problems.

STEP ONE – create a formal process for measuring the performance of the City's CEO.

It's been two years since The City switched from the Board of Commissioners model to a corporate governance model. When we made that switch, we failed to put in place a formal means for evaluating the CEO.

But we've changed that now. Council has approved the new performance evaluation process, and we unanimously approved the CEO's draft work plan for 2003.

Step one is completed and management has already begun to act.

STEP TWO – establish an Accountability, Priorities and Agenda Committee of Council... APAC for short.

APAC would collapse three committees into one. It would set the agenda for Council, deal with senior personnel matters and coordinate intergovernmental affairs.

More importantly, APAC would meet twice a month with our City Executive.

At these Accountability Sessions, the Mayor and four chairs of the Standing Policy Committees would discuss major files with the Executive.

Committee members would provide policy interpretation and share that information with other members of Council, through our existing Standing Policy Committees.

Some Aldermen have said APAC will be a Super Committee. It will create two-classes of Alderman. That simply is not true.

Chairmanship of the Standing Policy Committees change each year. The Chairs are elected by their peers.

All members of Council would be welcome at these Accountability Sessions.

All members of Council could take part in discussions. APAC isn't intended to exclude any member of Council. It's intended to ensure that they have the information they need, at a time when they need it to make informed decisions.

I do see the irony in this situation. Here we have a proposed committee, designed to give Council the tools they need to make timely decisions, and we've tabled it for six weeks.

STEP THREE – close the accountability gap between the Executive and the rest of management team.

We have 5 Executive Officers who report to the CEO. We have another 218 managers, who report, directly or indirectly, to those 5 Executive Officers. Collectively, our management team is responsible for our 12,000 City employees.

Step Three involves tightening up lines of communication and tightening up lines of accountability between these levels. Our CEO is already in the process of making these changes.

Finally, STEP FOUR - City Council needs to turn the mirror on itself.

Did you know, there are nearly 40 committees that report directly to City Council?

Here's a comparison to some of our City streets. What happens when too much traffic is funneled on to a road?

I'll tell you what happens, it turns into a parking lot. It's gridlock. Nothing moves. Sitting in Council sometimes feels like sitting in traffic on 6th Avenue some days.

But Council has the power to break that gridlock.

I've proposed that the Audit Committee undertake a formal governance audit to ensure our governance is effective.

The mandate of Council Committees will be scrutinized to ensure overlaps are minimized. And this may result in the consolidation or elimination of some committees. We will improve reporting structures and encourage a greater efficiency.

So, where will these four steps lead us?

They will lead to better municipal government. They will lead to a more responsive and responsible administration. And these changes will ensure Council members have the information they need to make timely decisions with confidence.

In the past few weeks, I've heard some people talk about leadership and still others talk about the need to find consensus on Council.

Consensus is easy when the agenda is light. When the issues you're grappling with aren't very weighty or contentious.

But this City Council has taken on a heavy agenda. We're committed to addressing the issues that are most important to Calgarians.

That means we are going to see some 8-7 votes on Council. It's natural and not always a bad thing... That's democracy.

John F. Kennedy once said, "My experience in government is that when things are non-controversial and beautifully coordinated, there is not much going on."

It's true.

Leadership is about listening and respecting other people's opinions, and it's about taking part in constructive debate. But it's not about forever striving for consensus at the expense of making decisions. You can't have 15 vetoes around the Council Table.

I'd like everyone in this room to do me a favour. If your Alderman is Gord Lowe, Ray Jones, Dale Hodges, Craig Burrows, Ric McIver or Linda Fox-Mellway, give them a call.

Pat them on the back, because they supported this initiative. These Alderman are ready to close the Accountability Gap at City Hall, and they need your support.

In the wise words of broadcaster Arthur Godfrey, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

It's time for us to get moving.

Thank you."