

OTTAWA MAYOR'S SLASH AND BURN APPROACH THREATENS TO DAMAGE VITAL CITY SERVICES

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Anyone who thought Ottawa Mayor Larry O'Brien's legal problems might slow him down a bit got a rude shock this week when the Mayor returned to one of his favorite themes – the need to cut more jobs from departments reeling from past reductions. And nothing is going to turn him away from his crusade. Not warnings that more cuts will damage the City's ability to provide vitally important municipal services. Nor fears by our most vulnerable citizens – low income families, seniors and those coping with disabilities – that more cuts will make their lives even harder. No, the Mayor has his mind made up and he's not going to let the facts get in the way. He promised to cut taxes – and that's what he's going to do, no matter who gets hurt.

As with most bad ideas, this one has a history. It starts with the Mayor's 'Smart Management' vision speech, delivered on November 7, 2007, which was roundly panned as being neither visionary nor smart. Critics called it "rambling" and "short on specifics", taking special aim at his call for the outsourcing of many City functions and the possible sale of Hydro Ottawa – a particularly bad idea, given that its profits fund many important municipal programs.

Sadly, this was just the opening shot in a larger battle fought during recent Budget discussions when the Mayor and a few neo-conservative die-hards tried to ram through the deep cuts needed to deliver on his zero percent tax increase promise. One proposal involved massive cuts to the library system and closing ten branches. Faced with a huge public outcry, that particular proposal was dropped – as was the idea of a zero percent tax increase. Instead Council voted for a 4.9% tax increase rather than implement the massive cuts required under the Mayor's plan.

Undeterred the Mayor is back at it again – as seen by the motion he put forward on Tuesday, June 17, 2008, at a meeting of Council's Corporate Services and Economic Development Committee. It called for the elimination of 500 jobs by year's end and a cap on municipal employment from then on in. It was a crazy idea, given our growing City and the need for better municipal services, not reduced ones. But the Mayor was persuasive – claiming that such a move was needed given the tough economic times that lie ahead - persuasive enough in fact that Councillors fell for it, voting 10-1 in favour of the motion.

Still, not everyone was taken in. Councillor Alex Cullen labeled the motion "a useless waste of time", adding that, "until we know where these cuts would be made and what services they would affect, we can't make an informed decision on this and we aren't being honest with our citizens. And Councillor Peter Hume called O'Brien's plan "political theatre" and "not based on reality", noting that "Council is not good at reducing

services”. Senior bureaucrats didn’t seem all thrilled either as shown by comments from City Manager Kent Kirkpatrick who emphasized that cutting 500 jobs from the city’s payroll in one year would have considerable impact on how the city delivers services and programs. He stated, “You won’t get that without impacting services. That shouldn’t be a surprise to council.”

Not to be deterred, the Mayor made it clear that as far as he’s concerned, the matter is settled. According to him, “it’s time to not be afraid of the word ‘cut’.” But while he may not be afraid, a lot of other people are – like those workers likely to be laid off or those seniors who will see cuts to the services they depend on. And they’re right to be worried since this represents just one more round in what is proving to be a bit of a habit at City Hall. City Manager Kent Kirkpatrick estimates that 8% of the City’s workforce has already been cut since amalgamation. And the negative impacts can be seen wherever you look. Just ask our paramedics who are seeing ‘zero level’ in the City’s ambulance service almost daily – with no crews available for new calls. When that happens, sick people are put on hold and told to wait their turn. Or ask any of the ambulance call centre operators and dispatchers who are leaving in droves, taking their skills and experience with them, because chronic understaffing and underfunding has made life unbearable. Or ask the families of elderly residents who face a two-year wait for a place in one of the City’s long-term care facilities. Ask any of them if they agree with the Mayor on the need for more cuts and they will laugh in your face.

Contrary to what the Mayor may think, Ottawa is a growing community – with a big future. Because it’s growing, the demand for municipal services is also growing. So instead of cutting jobs we should actually be hiring new people and trying to retain the highly skilled people we already have. For it’s only by ensuring a critical mass of experienced staff that we can hope to address our current needs, let alone those likely to be seen in the future. This was hammered home recently by CUPE 503 President Brian Madden who noted that, “The rapid growth of our city makes it imperative that we do all in our power to build even greater capacity so we can address our current and future needs rather than undertake what amounts to a ‘fire sale’ of our assets and people, just because the Mayor is afraid of a possible short-term downturn in the economy. Great cities have a long term vision of what they can be. And they don’t run for the exits every time there’s a negative report on the business channel.”