

Tiptoeing through a mine field

Council faces tough decisions

Don Ford, My View

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I don't envy the rough road Mayor Cam Jackson and the rest of city council have to navigate over the next few months.

Upcoming City Hall decisions are likely going to leave some residents scratching their heads, wondering what has become of the small-town Burlington they remember from all those years ago.

The answer is simple. The city is growing up -- and out -- and its infrastructure has to keep pace with the rate of growth or risk failing to accommodate all who now call Burlington home.

Reminiscing about simpler times isn't going to make this city's growing pains disappear.

Pursuing unwinnable Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) challenges on the taxpayers' dime also does little to stem the tide of growth -- as council recently learned with Wal-Mart.

In some respects, a couple of the larger issues before council are like an unmapped mine field. Tough decisions will have to be made and no matter what council decides, there are going to be casualties.

The challenging agenda ahead includes several issues carried over from the previous administration under former mayor Rob MacIsaac.

Any adjustment period the electorate extended to newcomers Jackson and councillors Peter Thoen (Ward 2) and Rick Goldring (Ward 5) has likely vanished now that council must decide such serious matters as the widening of Waterdown Road, the proposed downtown McMaster campus and a budget forecast that never accounted for a Mac campus.

The latter is particularly troubling because the inclusion of a Mac campus in the city's short-term financial forecast will likely come at the expense of other planned projects -- or a tax hike.

While few dispute the enormous boost a university campus delivers -- financially and to Burlington's reputation -- the proposed downtown site has stirred up a hornet's nest of debate about how it may compound an already dismal downtown parking situation.

Much like the recent Fairview Street Wal-Mart/ OMB debacle, the Waterdown Road widening appears to present council with a no-win scenario.

While the mayor seems determined to leave the road's residents with the impression no stone remains unturned in his effort to minimize the impact on their lives, all signs point to four lanes ultimately replacing the current two.

With so much Queen's Park experience under his belt, Jackson knows he's not going to be able to please everyone, all the time. He also has to know that providing residents with an all-inclusive political process -- one that always makes time for public input -- will eventually prove meaningless if the most vocal interest groups never see a decision go their way (see Wal-Mart).

In time, the mayor's public consultation approach on issues could breed apathy among those who feel their voices are being heard, but are rarely, if ever, given serious consideration.

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