

# Battling local government often seems like a lost cause

*Margaret Bird - April 2024*

You can't fight city hall. This is a common expression meaning that it's difficult, or impossible, for the ordinary person to overcome the rules and systems of government.

This American idiom became a popular phrase in the twentieth century, but it was in use in the late 1800s and may be related to the New York politics of the time. Tammany Hall was a political organization in New York that was founded in the 1700s and, by the mid-to-late 1800s, Tammany Hall controlled the Democratic Party and, therefore, all of politics in the region. Tammany Hall was extremely powerful, so in that case, it was indeed impossible to fight city hall.

Light-bulb moment here: I believe we have a very similar situation with our city hall, except that it's not the Democrats we're dealing with here.

The phrase suggests that the government or bureaucracy has too much power and resources, and that individuals who try to fight against it are unlikely to win. And, winning would depend on the specific circumstances and the resources and tactics of both sides. Challenging the decisions or policies of a municipal government or bureaucracy, when their actions and narratives are already carved in stone and purposely built to be nigh-on impenetrable, can make the public's work very difficult. However, there have been instances in which individuals or groups have successfully challenged the decisions or policies of government institutions through legal means, activism, or public pressure.

Trying to battle government bureaucracy can appear to be an exercise in futility, but it shouldn't be that way. The system has been designed to completely discourage the public from challenging the bureaucratic actions, although their approach can be cleverly coated to give an opposite impression.

The phrase 'fight city hall', both as a call to arms and a signal of futility, has been a staple for newspaper headlines for more than a century.

At its heart, this phrase expresses a deeply cynical view about the ability of average citizens to have a say and an impact on the policy decisions made by their local governments. Indeed, it's part of a more widely-held view that government institutions, at all levels, are somehow not on the side of their citizens, have their own agendas, or are otherwise indifferent and, therefore, cannot be trusted. However, although many citizens can and regularly do avail themselves of the opportunities to participate in their local government, their voices, although usually heard, are not immediately or directly acknowledged and, many times, with no action occurring as a result of the public's engagement on behalf of their community!

What lack of public-service actions, leads the phrase 'you can't fight city hall' to be firmly kept in place as a widely-held view?

Chronic failure to process applications/permits in a reasonable timeframe has been top of the list for a long time. Then there's the ongoing upgrade of 911 services, ordered seven years ago by the CRTC, that all such services be upgraded to a next-generation standard. Motions are another bone of contention as, even when voted through by council's majority vote, these motions are often not carried out by senior administration – with no accountability, whatsoever, being demanded by the mayor and council. Transparency is also high on the taxpayers' wish list and, no matter how many times this essential 'state' is expected or requested, it never occurs – it remains a screen to all hidden data and agendas!

Another hot topic, that comes up repeatedly, is the frustration of members of the public having such difficulty to be allowed their public right as a delegate in speaking to council on either a new important topic or a long-time unaddressed-by-council topic. Seems senior staff are running both council and the public. This has to be changed immediately.

Last but not least are the annual municipal budgets wherein the senior management will never expose the real old money and new money figures in dollar amounts every year, even though it has been requested repeatedly. All of the above points are totally shrouded due to a total lack of two-way communication between the bureaucrats and the general public. In fact, and very sadly, communication, transparency, and accountability, are seemingly avoided at all costs.

In this current digital world, we are seeing a huge lack of transparency and it is a major issue in many countries. It can inhibit the free flow of information and lead to corruption, oppression, and mismanagement of resources. It can lead to a lack of trust between citizens and the government, as well as a lack of accountability and poor governance.

The reason transparency is so important is that it goes hand in hand with trust. You can't have one without the other, and accountability focuses on the ownership, or the responsible behaviour shown by all individuals in the workplace.

So, what is the answer to changing the environment and performance at city hall so that their menu offers transparency, accountability, and open communication every single day? How do we make sure that these public officials offer real public service in a cost-effective and open way?

The first way must surely be to bring about an effective realization that the bureaucrats work for the citizens and not the other way round. If we can accomplish that, then perhaps we can finally get the phrase, 'you can't fight city hall' to disappear?

Is that a dream, or can we make this a reality?