Reduce power & influence of unelected municipal officials

Margaret Bird - December 2025

The public easily recognizes when there's trouble in-house between the elected and unelected officials. The most noticeable point is when council motions are voted through but staff doesn't carry out the directive of this vote and, additionally, when the mayor does not hold the senior staffers to account for this lack of not following directions. Is this some kind of status competition between the elected and unelected or is it just plain ignorance of their position descriptions? Either way, when senior staffers do not do their jobs as required, there's an obvious answer.

Taxpayers do not like to see this happening at the municipal office. And this is not a rare occurrence, it is the constant modus operandi of all those who are not in an elected position. Not following council directives, or hiding information that they don't want the public to see or know about, seems to be the norm. Is this a sign that senior staffers are trying to prove their power over the elected members of council? And this is not just a local problem – many municipalities have the same problem.

To reduce the power and influence of unelected municipal staff, elected officials need to assert their authority, improve transparency, and enhance community engagement. This involves clearly defining roles, establishing accountability mechanisms, and empowering residents to participate in decision-making.

There are many important steps to not overstepping the boundary between the elected council and the unelected (selected) staff, and preventing an unleashing of power from the wrong direction.

There's an extremely important need for reassertion of all the elected officials' authority. Elected officials -- particularly the head of council -- need to clearly define their roles and responsibilities (and also those of staff) ensuring that the staff understands their advisory and support functions are just that when it comes to policy and budget.

While delegation is necessary, it should be done with clear parameters and oversight. Staff should not be making decisions that are within the influence and authority of elected officials.

It is very important that regular performance reviews should be implemented, for all staff, focusing on their adherence to council directives and their effectiveness in supporting the elected officials. This is a crucial step.

In municipalities with strong mayor powers, the mayor needs to use those powers to set the agenda, direct staff, and ensure accountability, while also being mindful of transparency and conflict of interest. And a mayor's accountability is held by municipal council who can direct staff and oversee policies, and the citizens through elections and their role in reporting contraventions of by-laws. Municipal officers and bodies, like integrity commissioners and potential auditors general, also provide avenues for accountability and investigation into misconduct.

There should always be a continual eye on enhancing transparency and accountability, too, as this seems to be overlooked much of the time. Mayor and council should ensure that all council meetings, including committee meetings, are open to the public, and that all relevant documents, including staff reports and presentations, are readily accessible, and in a timely fashion.

A clear process should be established for public access to information, including how to make freedom of information requests (with associated costs) and how to file complaints about municipal services. There's too much secrecy about many of the so-called public processes.

It would also be a good idea to implement mechanisms like a municipal ombudsman, auditor general, and lobbyist registry to investigate complaints, audit financial practices, and ensure transparency in lobbying activities, such as actions taken to communicate with municipal government officials to influence decisions on permits, contracts, policies, and programs. These activities can include written or verbal communications, and they may be performed by paid third-party lobbyists or employees of organizations. Due to the potential for conflicts of interest, lobbying is subject to scrutiny, and many municipalities, particularly in Ontario, have established lobbyist registries to promote transparency and ethical conduct.

A rule that seems to have been forgotten is the declaring of potential conflicts at the beginning of every council meeting. Strict rules need to be enforced regarding conflict of interest for both elected officials and staff, ensuring that any potential conflicts are declared and addressed appropriately.

Community residents need to be empowered, encouraged and engaged in the business of their local municipality. Prioritization should be given to community consultation on significant policy decisions, ensuring that residents have a meaningful opportunity to provide input. This is very important because without total public awareness and involvement, who is going to hold the elected and unelected to account?

Many citizen advisory committees should be established to provide input on specific policy areas, ensuring diverse representation and meaningful engagement.

Utilization of technology to enhance transparency and community engagement, such as online portals for accessing

information, providing feedback, and participating in discussions, is also a vital component. However, due to many seniors not using computers, municipalities should also place their advertisements in local newspapers and on the radio, to make sure everyone is equally aware. There should also be strong encouragement for the establishment and support of neighbourhood associations to facilitate communication and participation at the local level.

By continually implementing all these strategies, municipalities can ensure that elected officials are truly in charge, that staff operates within their defined roles, and that residents have a meaningful voice in their local government.