

HOUSING AND THE FALL ELECTION

By *John W. Herbert*

Most Ottawa residents are now aware of the fact that there will be a municipal election this October. To date, most of the media have focused on the mayoralty candidates and some of the higher profile issues. The poll that appeared last weekend pretty well summed up what everyone suspected by confirming Alex Cullen as a distant third, Larry O'Brien second and Jim Watson winning by a wide margin.

It's true that anything can happen between now and election day, but as things now stand, either Mayor O'Brien is going to have to come on very strongly or Jim Watson is going to have to make some big mistakes in order for the situation to change in any meaningful way.

Regardless of whether O'Brien or Watson prevail, in our current system of government, a mayor can only do so much. Ottawans seemed to signal a desire for change at City Hall the last time around when they elected a new mayor. Unfortunately, this turned out to be more of a symbolic gesture than anything else, in that all of the existing councillors were left in place. That makes it extremely tough for anyone, including Mayor O'Brien, to achieve meaningful change, especially with so many left wing anti-business councillors attempting to thwart anyone actually concerned about paying the bills.

There has been a lot of hope that this election might finally see some meaningful change on council but that now appears unlikely with so few having announced retirement. Much has been made about Jim Watson's conciliatory style and there's no doubt this would have a positive impact in building a consensus around contentious issues. But this ability can only carry council so far and as they say, "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." So, what else can we do if there is a desire for a more efficient, cost effective and less dysfunctional city council in the future than we've had in the past?

Structural political change is a very complicated and time consuming process but many believe that Ottawa's council has reached such a low point that we need to start a process of change and renewal now because things are only going to get worse. The first and most important step in this process is to agree on the fact that we need to change the way municipal politics conducts business in Ottawa. If we agree on this first point then a range of possibilities opens up. We believe that this notion of change is something that has been sorely missing in the electoral discussion to date and that now is the right time for it to take place.

Over the past year, numerous articles have offered a range of thoughts on the nature of political change that should take place but when all things are considered, we believe that the most beneficial change that could and should take place as a first step would be to have at least 50 per cent of Ottawa's councillors elected at large.

So, why would this be helpful and what does it all have to do with housing? Housing just happens to be an ideal example

of how city council's performance could be rather significantly increased by having at least half of the councillors vote on what they believe would be good for the city and not just their own ward. Take, for example, inner city redevelopment projects. In its 2003 official plan, city council voted that an increased emphasis be placed on the city growing 'up' rather than 'out' and this was described as 'intensification.'

This process was to support the notion of higher inner city densities through redevelopment while restricting new suburban growth. It all sounded well and good on paper and made councillors appear rather 'enlightened' until builders began coming forward with plans to implement council's new vision. Community residents strenuously objected and political leaders who had demanded new intensification projects suddenly found themselves between a rock and a hard place.

Everyone who objected to the projects fully supported intensification, just not in their neighbourhood and the whole NIMBY movement reared its ugly head. Councillors knew that they should vote for the projects that they had demanded but also knew that they would lose the next election in doing so. Self preservation ruled and inner city councillors voted for project downsizings that didn't even come close to meeting official plan objectives or made projects economically unviable thereby effectively terminating the problem until the next proposal came along.

Whereas all inner city councillors were uniformly threatened by the same official plan intensification demands, it wasn't long until they formed a voting block to protect one another's backs when it came down to voting on future projects.

This same problem arises with almost every important vote that affects the future of Ottawa whether it's Lansdowne Park or transportation routing. Individual ward councillors will happily vote against important projects whether they believe in them or not to ensure their re-election and mollify their electors. The only way around this dilemma is to have a significant number of councillors elected 'at large' and thereby able to vote on an issue's merits without having to worry about its impact on their re-election campaign. This is how we can build one great capital city rather than a disparate assortment of rag tag special interest groups.

And if you think this idea has merit, then tune in next month for the second improvement – the reintroduction of a board of control.



John W. Herbert is executive director of the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association. gohba.ca