

## Answering the Cheshire Cat: The First 45 Days of a New Council

by S. Bruce Peever

The first 45 days after an election are often a period of flux and anxiety with little meaningful or value-added activity. With great seriousness, councilmembers are assigned keys to the town hall, shown their seats in the council chambers, and sworn in as elected officials.

Meanwhile, staff are cleaning up from the election, getting ready for the budget process, and fretting about the new and different personalities on the council. Add to this dynamic the holiday and Christmas season, and the first 45 days slip by without anyone's really noticing they're gone.

Elected officials are first briefed on the demographic profile of the local government and the change forecasts. This material is not as bland as it might seem, for the demographic statistics are often at odds with the accepted political reality.

The reality is that three years is a short time to accomplish any type of corporate agenda. It is imperative to jump-start the work to make meaningful progress. In many local governments, the New Year signals the start of the annual budget process. Then, the budget becomes the primary focus for the community, leaving strategic planning to be done during the spring, when there is time for it.

In many localities, the strategic planning process involves at least six months of community consultation, "wordsmithing" of vision statements, and smoothing of ruffled feathers. By the time the strategic plan for the newly elected council has been rolled out to the ratepayers 12 months later, 24 months are left in which to get it done. Most often, this means that the council is set up for failure.

It is little wonder that many councils feel like Alice, of Alice in Wonderland fame, hearing those smug words of the Cheshire Cat at the crossroads: "If you don't know where you want to go, it really doesn't matter which way you turn."

Immediately after the election, the new council is full of ambition, and the issues confronting the community are fresh and in the face of all the players: council, chief administrative officer, staff, media, and ratepayers. To leverage the energy from this environment means changing how we, as local government managers, do business.

To jump-start the work of a new council in the town of Lincoln, Ontario, the following three-step process was adopted to deliver a plan that would focus council and staff on service-delivery priorities and results, along with their fiscal implications. The process takes 45 days.

### **Step 1. Situational Analysis**

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Ditch the old mid-December, Saturday-morning council orientation meeting, where directors drone away on how their departments are so unique and essential. Begin preparing for the new council in early October. In Lincoln, the senior management team selects key lines of business on which it is imperative to brief councilmembers. The selection criteria come both from issues emerging and in the forefront over the past three years and from those appearing in the three weeks before election day.

In Lincoln, we lay out this analysis in a standard format (see Figure 1) for each key line of business: service profile, current situation analysis, future fiscal and community impacts, and recommended options/courses of action.

On the Monday night following the election, the first meeting with council takes place. Directions to the washroom and other similar administrative matters are left to individual appointments. The charting of a future focus is the priority.

#### **Figure 1. Simple, Practical Template for Service Overviews**

1. Service Profile
  - Key Desired Results
  - Assets Overview
  - Manpower Overview
  - Business Model (Direct/Indirect)
2. Current Situation Analysis
  - Service Demand Drivers
  - Service Cost/Revenue Drivers
  - Performance Indicators/ Targets and Barriers

- Regulatory Requirements

### 3. Future Fiscal & Community Impacts

- Historical & Future Budget Impact

- Stakeholder Impact

- Intergovernmental Impact

- Governance Implications

### 4. Recommended Options/ Course of Action

- Staff's "triage" priority rating

- Suggested Options/Actions

- Service level enhancement or reduction options

Elected officials are first briefed on the demographic profile of the local government and the change forecasts. This material is not as bland as it might seem, for the demographic statistics are often at odds with the accepted political reality. We all see the world through the lenses of our own glasses, and the hard numbers of statistics can be sobering tools on which to base a future direction.

The demographic profile is followed by the treasurer's statement on the fiscal health of the corporation. This statement begins with a review of the corporation's financial principles, highlights tax policy and key financial ratios, and ends with an understandable big-picture summary, which concludes the first night.

Allowing for a night off, we begin again on Wednesday with an overview of Lincoln's infrastructure and hard assets, followed by the situational analysis of each of the key lines of business. It is important to note here that not every department or director gets face time with the council. CAOs should expect and be prepared to deal with some push-back from directors on this point.

Presenting a situational analysis to the council is not an exercise in fairness, that is, in equal air time before a new council. Rather, it is a means of communicating an essential town picture, based on the most accurate available data, to the newly elected representatives. It is only in this way that councilmembers can separate the wheat from the chaff and discern the critical issues, thus setting new priorities. The situational analysis closes Step 1.

## **Step 2. Strategic Directions**

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The start of Step 2 (second Monday after election night) triggers the council's turn to push back. The briefings received the previous week often conflict with the common understanding of the locality. Issues may center on the wealth of the community, the state of the infrastructure, or the impact of service changes to be made in key lines of business. Regardless, it all comes back to taxes and the level of taxation.

For this reason, we begin Step 2 with the question: What kind of council do its members want to be?

"Just Say No" Council: For this type of governing body, managing taxes and reducing expenditures supersede other considerations.

Roads, Pipes, n' Trucks Council: Taxpayers' investment is concentrated in existing infrastructure by preserving its dollar value through lifecycle-based rehabilitation and replacement.

Soccer Mom Council: Developing more parks, arenas, and libraries, and enhancing service levels to meet the demands of suburban families, are uppermost.

The determination of a governing theme allows for crafting fiscal and budgetary principles and a revenue framework for the next 36 months. The next Monday and Wednesday nights focus on setting a short list of priorities and establishing consensus on the desired results for the new term within the chosen governance theme.

It would be misleading, of course, to suggest that this period is anything but messy and chaotic. This is when election issues come to the fore, and the value of an external consultant becomes apparent.

The close of Step 2 is the turning point for the process. Council has debated and exercised its newfound collective muscle. It has earned a week off while staff members document and correlate the council's decisions.

### **Step 3. Council Review**

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Council begins the third and final step (fourth Monday after election night) with a review of what it has accomplished so far. Council's desired results and key priorities are redrafted into four to six strategic directions. What remains

outstanding is the slate of work initiatives needed to make the strategic directions real (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Council Review of Work Initiatives (Step 3)**



When they are guided by these strategic directions, councilmembers will find that the identification of key work initiatives has been simplified. These work initiatives originate in the situational analysis of the key lines of business. And the slate of work initiatives forms the foundation of the upcoming annual budget.

In January, the draft strategic plan is rolled out for public scrutiny. Though this plan is a companion document to the budget, it is also the source to which budget decisions can be traced back. Revision and final copy, based upon public feedback, are the final tasks. In February, the new strategic plan and budget are jointly approved.

Only a limited window of opportunity exists for councilmembers to consider fiscal and operational priorities. After 45 days, strategic thinking recedes in the face of ongoing political workload and operational pressures. If the council is going to succeed in achieving real change, it must be able to answer that Cheshire Cat. It must know where it wants to go. PM

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## What Things Do Most New Councilmembers Need to Learn?

At the meeting of the Manager-Elected Officials Focus Group held during the 2004 ICMA Annual Conference in San Diego, California, 18 local government managers listed these items as the ones they felt newly elected officials should become knowledgeable about to be effective in their elected positions:

- Budget process.
- Council and staff roles and responsibilities.
- Policies and procedures for good councilmember-and-manager interaction.
- Council's role in creating and legislating policy.
- How to acquire information that an elected official needs.
- Issue-specific orientation.
- Distinction between policy and administration.
- Capital planning process.
- Meeting protocol; using such rules and procedures as Robert's Rules of Order.
- Ethics expectations for council and manager.
- Group dynamics; individual member versus member of the group.
- Unwritten rules.
- Operating departments; what these departments and staff do and don't do.
- Preferred methods of communication between manager and elected officials.
- Chain of command.
- Governmental codes.
- Confidentiality on closed matters.
- Basic council-meeting protocol (schedule of meetings, locations of facilities).
- Handling a citizen concern.
- Awareness that a manager is apolitical.
- Awareness of major issues facing the local government.
- Value of intergovernmental relations.
- Accepting that staff members perform the work, not the council.
- Ability to explain information on the council-manager form of government versus other forms of government.