

### Cobourg council should consider Question Period

By Grahame Woods, Northumberland Today  
Wednesday, September 6, 2017 11:58:00 EDT PM



Grahame Woods

Dem-o-crat-ic (dem-o-krat-ik) adj. In accordance with the principle of equal rights for all. (Oxford American dictionary)

Question Period; To seek information from the government and to call it to account for its actions. (Wikipedia)

Ahh, democracy and the right to ask questions of government, whether it be in the House of Commons in Ottawa, where the first Question Period was held on November 29, 1867, or in the Cobourg Council Chamber in Victoria Hall.

With 346 days to go before the next municipal election, it seems an e-mail request to Mayor Brocanier and council from Cobourg resident Bill Thompson (aka The Birdman of Cobourg), in which he asks, in part .... "Is there any directive/regulation whether a public question and answer period could/could-not, be incorporated into council meeting proceedings?" seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

Sent on Aug. 23 at 8:19 p.m., the mayor's reply was instant, pressing send at 9:44 a.m. on Aug. 24M turning down Thompson's suggestion, saying that Cobourg council had consulted with the best municipal legal representatives in Ontario and they advised against opening up our agendas to public questions as, in the past, it has led some municipalities to litigation.

Mayor Brocanier didn't indicate if he consulted the other members of Council before replying – or perhaps he called an extraordinary, late nig summons to discuss the issue.

But wait a minute. In Cobourg's *Feel Good Town* surely there is room for citizens' spontaneous involvement with the running of our town through a structured Question Period at the end of each council meeting? Citizens of Cobourg care about their town, as over 1,200 residents responding to a recent Waterfront Project survey shows, and letters to the editor of this paper confirm. A Question Period? 30 minutes at the end of each council meeting allocated to allow six residents five minutes each to ask, and have answered, one question – or a variation on th The question could be directed to council generally or to a specific member. With a question to council as a whole, the mayor could delegate the appropriate councillor to reply. Citizens wanting to ask questions would have to register (without disclosing the subject matter of their question) prior to, and up to, say, one hour before the meeting. Should all the six spaces be already allocated, then the person would go onto the next meeting's list.

This is Cobourg, not some backwater; the Cobourg that just celebrated the 150th anniversary of its existence since Confederation, a town with a sophisticated and involved population that cares about where we've been and where we are going. Council members should be pleased that citizens want to interact with them in a public forum. Voter participation in municipal affairs doesn't end at the ballot count; it should be encouraged continuously throughout a council's term of office and Cobourg council should/could be a leader in demonstrating the widest open government possible.

Instead of rejecting Bill Thompson's idea of a Question Period without any discussion, council should explore his idea with a view to a trial run. Perhaps Mayor Brocanier responded too quickly to Thompson's request. It takes guts to backtrack and say, "Hey, let's give it an exploratory test run. What's to lose?" Nothing. But so much to gain.

Yes, it's 2017.

*Grahame Woods can be reached at [ggwoods@sympatico.ca](mailto:ggwoods@sympatico.ca)*

---