
OPINION LETTERS

GUEST COLUMN: COBOURG TAXPAYERS ASSOCIATION

Where is the wisdom and democracy in Cobourg?

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The Victoria Hall art gallery is open year-round during week days from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and during Victoria Playhouse showtimes.

Democracy traces back to the Greek words demos, meaning "people," and kratia, meaning "power." People power is central to democracy and yet, today, more than two-thousand years after the birth of democracy in Ancient Greece, the power of the people is eroding, as never before. And nowhere is the loss more evident than here in Cobourg.

There are seven municipalities in Northumberland and in five the mayors welcome question and answer periods for the public and media. But not in Cobourg.

Democracy's foundation is the participation of citizens and yet, citizen involvement has been declining and voter turnout for most municipalities is only about fifty percent. A top priority for every mayor and councillor should be to increase municipal turnout to 75%, which can only be achieved through the regular participation of citizens. Low public participation is a direct reflection of the leader's lack of interest in a true democracy.

Obviously, Mayor Gil Brocanier has not given this fundamental principle much consideration. Why?

What leader, who has the best interests of the community at heart, does not want to hear from citizens, regularly? What leader does not think elected officials should listen to the public, regularly? What leader does not understand the importance of the media in fostering a well-informed public? What leader does not welcome open debate, even disruption, rather than trying to control public discourse? What leader does not understand that innovation, creativity and community betterment come from public participation, not public exclusion?

What Mayor Brocanier is doing when he curtails free speech is detrimental to the community. Eventually it backfires. Because people retreat into apathy and the community spirit recedes as the town becomes nothing more than an isolated collection of administrators managing taxpayers' money. These so-called leaders never tap into the power, ingenuity, innovation and indomitable human spirit of citizens. As the 2011 bestselling book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, demonstrates, the wisdom coming from large numbers of people is nearly always superior to the decision-making of small groups and professed experts.

An election every four years is not an adequate democratic process and for leaders to not actively, openly and frequently involve citizens is to deny them a role in determining the future of their community. Also, a lack of citizen involvement is clear evidence of leaders who want power without responsibility, authority without scrutiny, decision-making without question.

In Brighton, democracy shines brighter because citizens not only have a question and answer period, they also have "citizen comment," which is a regular agenda time when people can comment about anything - whether on the agenda or not. Also, Brighton has a question period and residents have their correspondence put on the council agenda and it can be debated and voted on, right then and there. No waiting. No censorship. No being sent back for a "staff report." No being "received for information purposes only" - never again to see the light of day. But not in Cobourg.

The question is: Why doesn't Mayor Brocanier want the same inclusion? Why doesn't he want to hear what the people have to say - frequently? How can he represent the people's best interest if he does not encourage, foster and support a Q&A forum for open dialogue and debate? Does he not value citizens' ideas and input - the wisdom of the crowd?

Residents have many questions. Too bad there's no forum in which we can ask them.

Lydia Smith is president of the Cobourg Taxpayers Association.
