

5 reasons not to run for council

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- by **Danielle Klooster**

Ever wonder what motivates a person to run for municipal council?

In many communities this year, there are high numbers of candidates for council, as well as many mayoral hopefuls. But it seems that with every election, I repeatedly hear the same misguided and even mendacious rationales for taking the plunge. As a former councillor, I'm dismayed and even irritated by people who expect the voter to select them when they haven't done their homework and they don't have the right intentions.

Here are my top five bad reasons to run:

1 "People are ready for change!"

Newsflash: every new candidate says that every election. Sometimes it's true; sometimes it's just perception. Often, when voters go behind that screen, they get a bit scared of change (which is natural) and they go for the known quantity. That aside, you just plain need a better reason to run. If the best you can do is "Hey, I'm new!"... I mean, come on. You need to understand taxation, budgets, financial statements, water, sewer, garbage, road construction, residential/commercial/industrial development, the role of governance, intermunicipal relations, bylaws, social and economic development and more.

Have you done your homework on this stuff? Do you have informed positions? Do you have proven leadership experience? Have you ever even sat on a board?

As a voter I need to know about what qualifies you for the job and that you get it. Simply representing "change" is woefully inadequate.

Furthermore, as of the day you are sworn in, you officially cease being "change" and become part of the institution — it's what you're signing up for. And if you think that folks are magically going to like you better than the last group, think again. The moment you sit down to the council table, you officially become "them." This I promise.

2 "I'm going to clean house!"

Uh, no you're not.

If you envision yourself walking into the municipal office taking over operations, firing a bunch of people, and generally sticking your nose into administration's business, you're in for a rude awakening.

If you want to manage your town or city, apply for the job. The CAO's job is management; your role as a councillor is governance. You don't get to direct the staff. You are not the bylaw officer, the public works foreman or the HR director. In fact, you have only one employee — the CAO.

And guess what? In many communities, the CAO has an employment contract. You can't just ditch this guy so you can take over running the place.

Get a new guy and you still don't have the right to manage the municipality. Besides, removal would take a majority vote of council and would cost the ratepayers a whole bunch of money. [Editor's note: The current Owen Sound Council did, and it did]. You don't have to like the town manager or any of the staff but as a councillor, you are legally bound to do things properly (spoiler alert: you're going to take an oath to that affect if you get elected).

3 "I'm going to fix the [insert pet peeve] situation!"

Another very misguided statement that reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of how councils function.

It's an interesting dichotomy, of course, since candidates run as individuals but then they have to work as a team once elected to get anything accomplished.

The truth of the matter is that you have no power outside of council chambers. Even around the council table, your power extends only to the amount of influence you can leverage during debate, and to your (one) vote.

You ought never overstep your bounds or ram through your personal agenda. You have a responsibility to consider all matters related to the strategic and fiscal direction of your municipality, and your job, as one member of a team, is to find ways to work together to make wise, informed, responsible decisions for the benefit of all. You are one of a group of decision-makers; no more, no less.

You won't have the ability to unilaterally wave a magic wand and fix all of the potholes (although people will think you can).

If you make promises you can't keep, you perpetuate the stereotype of politician. So stop it.

4 "We have to get rid of the current corrupt/secretive/self-serving/incompetent bunch!"

Ah, the ever popular "anti" campaign ... this tactic, sadly, is often successful. It resonates with coffee clatches and angry people.

The problem is that while it may get you elected, it's a poor foundation for being an effective mayor or member of council.

The day after you "get rid" of the last bunch, you have to actually do something. You will have a whole bunch of really important decisions in front of you; stuff that is already in process, that the previous council that you thought was so useless was working hard to deliberate over and consider and that perhaps you should have put some time into understanding.

An individual with a personal grievance who runs for office is not just in danger of being an ineffective councillor — these folks can be downright destructive.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: anybody can tear down; tell me what you are going to build.

5 "I'm going to make fiscal responsibility my No. 1 priority!"

This may well be the most irresponsible statement of all.

If all you want to do is find ways to save money, then let's abolish property taxes right now and we can all go home. After all, what's the point of even having taxes if the only thing we care about is not spending any money?

My point is this: yes, fiscal accountability and responsible spending are very, very important. And no one likes paying taxes, me included.

But the No. 1 responsibility of the councillor is not fiscal responsibility — it is to build community infrastructure for future generations.

Shame on you if in five, 10 or 25 years there is no water or sewer capacity or the roads are falling to pieces or there are insufficient playgrounds and recreation opportunities because you were busy pinching pennies instead of building a community.

There are good councillors and bad councillors most everywhere. Some mayors and councillors who should never be in office do get elected, and sometimes people are justifiably upset by actions and decisions. I get that.

But to the voter: can we agree to make informed decisions at the polls, instead of vilifying the entire group without, in many cases, even a basic understanding of the role, the decisions, the full story? How about those critical thinking skills, gang?

Why should you actually run for council? You should run because you wish to serve your community, to provide good leadership, to plan and build for the future. You should run because you have a contribution to make, ideas to be shared, passion that won't abate and a commitment to do the right thing no matter what. You should run if you understand that you will have to sacrifice popularity and family time, and that you will have to sometimes make decisions that benefit the community as a whole but don't benefit you personally. You should run if you want a better future for your grandchildren, and your grandchildren's grandchildren.

If any of the five terrible reasons I mentioned frame up your election campaign, take heart: it's not too late. You can withdraw from the race now and free up a seat for qualified people with proper intent. Or you can reflect on your intentions and set a new course with a commitment to serve your community for the all the right reasons.