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Johnston allegations

Saying there's no problem at city hall isn't enough

Using words like “toxic,” “mind-blowing” and “paranoid,” Robert Johnston dropped a bombshell last week.

Johnston was Greater Sudbury's interim chief administrative officer from the beginning of May until the end of September.

Dismissed suddenly on Sept. 29, the media has been after Johnston ever since to talk about the experience, but he has rebuffed all requests.

Until last week that is, when he agreed to sit down with Northern Life and The Sudbury Star together. He had a lot to say.

Johnston described the work environment at Tom Davies Square as the worst he'd ever seen it.

He said the mayor's office was paranoid about enemies and saw widespread conspiracies, and had a negative attitude toward staff. He said mayor and council interfered with decision-making to the point they micromanaged instead of governed, costing time and money, and creating an environment in which staff are afraid to make decisions or tailor reports to suit the whim



Editorial

of councillors.

Johnston's insistence that the fire department is plagued with health and safety issues (something the firefighter's union disputes) led to a blowout with the mayor that resulted in Johnston's sudden dismissal — a dismissal the mayor apparently wasn't allowed to hand down and a hastily called closed-door meeting of council was needed to authorize it.

For his part, Bigger, with support from former mayor Jim Gordon, said Sunday some pushback from staff should be expected because this council expects a

higher standard of performance than staff are likely used to. He also downplayed Johnston's criticisms as just “one person's opinion.”

Johnston may be just one person, but he's not your average city worker.

Broadly speaking, disgruntled former employees make poor sources for news stories because they are motivated to damage the organization they are criticizing. Here's the thing about Bob Johnston, though: He has a highly regarded 35-year career as one of the city's most successful senior managers; and he's staking his considerable reputation to speak out.

He may be just one person, but he's an impressive one.

What's more, the quiet, off-the-record thank yous we've received from city staff for the coverage confirm part of what Johnston had to say: That staff feel the work environment at city hall has grown toxic under Bigger's tenure.

Johnston insists his motivation is not revenge for being fired — he simply returns to his real job as

Listen

We're not saying Johnston is right unquestioningly. But his stature and status coupled with the nature of his allegations demand he be listened to.

CEO of the airport, after all — but concern for the health of the city and its employees.

We're not saying Johnston is right unquestioningly. But his stature and status coupled with the nature of his allegations demand further investigation.

Rumours that all was not well at Tom Davies Square have been circulating for months, but no one was willing to risk their livelihood by speaking to media — until, that is, Johnston spoke up.

We're concerned that, when asked to respond to Johnston's allegations, only Ward 2 Coun. Michael Vagnini gave them any weight. He suggested an independent body be brought in to review the situation.

The majority of council, including the mayor, was either openly dismissive or simply didn't return our calls.

This is not the openness and transparency that Bigger and this council were elected on, and that is particularly disappointing. After living through four years of dysfunction under the previous council, taxpayers voted for representatives they believed would help the city turn a corner.

What's more, the city is still without a permanent CAO. The search has dragged on for months and is likely to drag on even longer given Johnston's allegations — who would want to lead an organization with the problems he alleges exist?

Our massive municipality has some massive challenges. Addressing them is impossible in the environment Johnston describes.

These are serious accusations about your office and how it operates, Mayor Bigger. We hope things aren't as bad as Johnston contends, but simply saying there's no problem isn't enough.

IN FOCUS



A view of Sudbury

Michelle Romaniuk said her Sudbury includes the Superstack and a beautiful sunset. She snapped this photo in October at Moonlight Beach. Northern Life welcomes submissions of local photography for publication on this page. Send high-resolution images to apickard@northernlife.ca.

LETTERS

Letters to the editor should be exclusive to Northern Life. Include name, address and daytime phone number. Keep letters under 300 words. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. E-mail: editor@northernlife.ca

Compassion is what binds us together

One question that is being asked without adequate research is why the Western Countries are willing to welcome Syrian refugees, when even the Muslim states are not.

In actual fact, there are about 3 million refugees having fled to neighbouring countries such as Lebanon (1.14 million), Jordan (608,000) and Turkey (815,000). These refugees are trying to escape the same brutality that we fear — a conflict not of their making — but being embroiled within it nevertheless.

Only compassionate countries, and I direly hope Canada is at the

foremost, will think beyond the immediate knee-jerk response, and be willing to understand the plight of the women and children that are trying desperately to escape the violence, and extend a helping hand.

Most of us are immigrants, and we need to reflect on the hopes and aspirations that brought us here. We are a nation of goodness, and it is only love, compassion and sacrifice that will keep binding us together.

Hope, and not fear, is a more powerful force that will keep uniting us, and unite us it will, as it always has.

Riaz Bagha
Sudbury

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Former CAO Bob Johnston, CEO of Sudbury Airport, lashed out against the “toxic” environment at city hall:

Dave Mc: Nice to finally see someone has the balls to say it.

Michael Brian Petryna: We will never know how unsafe our City of Greater Sudbury really is, when people like Bob are silenced, and they will never find the forensic audit.

Connie Metayer: Sudbury city hall is like a trapped animal. Any good idea is chewed off rather than embraced.

Vanja Williamsson: Like I have already said, bigger is not always better.

Laurie M Jacques: Vote Bobby for mayor. City of Sudbury might be better off with him as your leader.

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