

Editorial

What is council waiting for

It has become abundantly clear there is a problem in the top office at Petrolia Town Hall.

And so far, council has done little to stand up for the taxpayers.

It's now known the CAO owns not one, but two buildings which the town he serves is using. And he's receiving cash from the town for it. He didn't disclose it - worse, when asked directly who owned 395 Fletcher, he named someone else even though he owned the building for 12 days. Two days later, in the CAO's absence, the treasurer had a lengthy speech at a budget meeting about how transparency between council and staff is one of the town's greatest assets. Perhaps someone should tell the CAO.

As egregious as the CAO's conflicts appear to be - with at least one expert suggesting a police investigation would not be out of order - there are many elected officials who haven't been doing their job either.

Most have been silent. The mayor refuses to even express disappointment at the turn of events, saying it is a personnel matter. That is patently absurd. It's also difficult to swallow that the mayor, who on most mornings can be found at the local coffee shop with the CAO and the director of facilities, would have no idea this was going on.

What is also difficult to understand is why the people we elected seem unwilling to do anything. It has been a week since the first allegation surfaced. There have been two council meetings since then and no one has raised the issue publicly. If council can't even express disappointment that their top administrator misled them, are they actually standing up for the taxpayer or protecting the staff member?

To those councillors who have remained silent and those who have hid behind concerns about privacy, you aren't doing what we elected you to do. It's an abdication of your duty. If you're serious about serving the people, stand up, and let us know how you are going to handle this.

The voters are waiting to see your actions.

Letters to the Editor

The Independent welcomes Letters to the Editor.

Our preferred methods to receive letters are via email to news@petrolialambtonindependent.ca (please use Letter in the subject line) or through our website www.petrolialambtonindependent.ca

You can also deliver letters to *The Independent* at 4156 Petrolia Line, Petrolia or drop them in the mail at *The Independent*, Petrolia, ON, N0N 1R0.

The Independent reserves the right to edit letters for brevity and clarity.

All letters need to be signed and must have a phone number for verification.

Our Story



Empire Day in Petrolia – notice the date because the picture is from 1900. Empire Day started in the early 1890s and today is celebrated as Victoria Day. This scene is Princess St. South behind the Presbyterian Church. The crowd may be standing where Canada Post stands today. Some of the houses in the background still exist today.

Dave Burwell Postcard Collection

The search for transparency at Petrolia town hall

I have been a working journalist since I was 18 and I've never seen a more secretive government than Petrolia.

In the four years which I have run *The Independent*, I've sat in practically every council meeting, gone to almost every public event, read more documents than most councillors do and probed deeper than the people elected to run the town for you.

And what has happened? Frankly, until now, I have been reluctant to say in case it sounds like whining. But in the light of what is going on, I feel it is important you know the full story.

The town officials were quite happy, at first, to see a new newspaper in town. They felt they had been treated poorly by *the Petrolia Topic*. The town stopped advertising with *The Topic* because it was pointing out not everyone was in favour of the new community centre. At first our relationship was cordial, although getting access to information was difficult. (I was once asked why I needed the information I requested - a strange question to ask a reporter.) So, I challenged them publicly, saying they weren't transparent. That did not go over well. An official at The

Centre was angry we had said how much money she would spend on renovations. She told our salesperson point blank she was told not to advertise with us because the town didn't like our reporting.

I went to a meeting with the CAO, only to find myself confronted by all of senior staff and the mayor to talk about it. I lost my cool, demanding to know who issued the order. In an attempt to stop me from yelling, the CAO took responsibility. There was a period of uneasy calm.

It was difficult again after I wrote an editorial in the wake of the Fairbank apartment issue. The town didn't publicize anywhere that the committee of adjustment was holding a meeting to make its decision. A number of people only found out through happenstance. And I called them out again for their lack of transparency. The relationship has been rocky since then.

And the town stopped virtually all advertising with *The Independent* even though it is the most effective tool to reach every one of its constituents. The town has also actively promoted among local merchants the use of social media to advertise - perhaps just a coincidence but still disappointing

that town officials would favour one business over another impacting my business - the only local media with taxpayers living within the town limits.

In the last week, *The Independent* has been uncovering other transparency problems.

Tuesday, when I tried to reach town staff, I was told the staff would no longer speak to the media - all media inquires would go to the mayor as per the media policy.

Thankfully, there are councillors who will speak their mind. And some staff members recognize that it is better to help provide information than hide it.

I have long bemoaned the state of our municipal councils abandoning their role of overseers and instead allowing staff to look after the fine details of the municipal workings.

I wonder how the people of Petrolia feel about council allowing staff to do their job now.

I'll continue asking tough questions for you and for me. After all, it is our town and our money; we have a right to know what is going on.



Heather Wright



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