

Managing Election Turnover

Location: Alberta

Topic(s): Council & CAO Relationship, Council Changeover

Please describe the situation.

During every municipal election the opportunity exists for citizens to provide a report card on their incumbent elected officials as well as decide upon any new entries into the political arena. This case study is about the CAO/Council relationship after a municipal election.

In Alberta, the municipal elections occur every four years with the last one in October 2017. There are about 345 municipalities in the province. An informal pool was conducted amongst a number of CAO's to provide a guess as to how many CAO's would be terminated within one year of that 2017 election. The one-year concluded in October 2018. Based upon an informal network of people, it was concluded that in excess of 30 CAO's received the proverbial "golden handshake". For some it was likely less golden while for others it was very golden. This represents close to 10% of all Alberta CAO's which seems to be an incredibly high number. This is a trend that seems to be on the increase as more and more CAO's are told "Council has decided a change in management is required and that your services are no longer required".

What was the current political environment? What factors led to the situation? What were the events that unfolded in this particular scenario?

A new Mayor was elected (who was a Councillor on the previous Council) along with three new Councillors (three incumbents were also re-elected). The new Mayor was a vocal opponent to most things that were of any consequence while he was a Councillor. As soon as the elections results were confirmed, it was known that things were about to change in a significant way. The Mayor-Elect had a specific agenda in mind and went about in a methodical way ensuring it was implemented. As a CAO with over 30 years of experience, and now a Mayor who went about things a much different way, I became an obstacle for him to achieve his goals. As conversations between the Mayor and myself became fewer and fewer, the situation became more untenable. Knowing the writing was on the wall, it became obvious that my days as CAO were limited and that the only thing not known was when the axe would fall. It took six months. Quite simply the Mayor needed/wanted me out of the way so he could go about doing things his way with his people.

How did you respond to or address the situation?

From election night until my services were no longer required was tenuous to say the least. Those six months required a mind set of doing what Council decided despite the distractions. It became obvious unofficial meetings were occurring with certain Council Members prior to the official Council meeting. Notwithstanding as CAO, a job still needed to be done, staff still needed to be provided direction, leadership needed to be demonstrated, and the municipality was still obligated to deliver its services. As CAO you are the one most staff look to for confidence, calmness and demeanour. It was important to "keep it together" despite what was happening in the background.

What lessons did you learn from this scenario?

A CAO is most definitely hired at the pleasure of Council. Regardless of the circumstances, if Council decides you are no longer a good fit, that is their prerogative. Accept their decision with dignity and mentally prepare yourself to move on. Do not try and figure out where you went wrong or failed simply accept the fact Council has made a decision and it is time to close the chapter on this segment of your career.

As long as you can look yourself in the mirror and say that you gave it your best, your integrity and reputation as an Administrator will survive. New opportunities always seem to appear. So do not despair, as things usually happen for a reason. Many times we do not know what that reason may be, but more often than not we are better off afterwards.

While circumstances are different for each of us, the common thread is we are suddenly thrust into a situation of upheaval and uncertainty. An extra ordinary Administrator/CAO is someone who maintains a positive attitude and is determined not to let this have a detrimental impact on their disposition and/or impact their character.

What advice would you give to someone going through a similar situation?

Ensure that you have a solid termination provision in your employment contract that protects you in the event Council exercises its prerogative. There are many colleagues and friends who can offer support. Accept that support and continue to dialogue with your peer network. There are fewer and fewer CAO's who remain in that capacity with the same municipality for a lengthy period of time. Consider your options and re-evaluate your personal goals after serving the same municipality for a long time.

And lastly, when your spidey senses start telling you something is not quite right or is about to change (your political acuity), re-evaluate your situation and take whatever corrective action best suits you. For some that may mean sharpening up the resume, for others an early retirement, or for others padding the bank account with a nice severance. Do not stick your head in the sand and think things will change when you look up. Be proactive versus reactive.