

Persuasion from Ratepayers

Location: New Brunswick

Topic(s): Council Ethics

Please describe the situation.

Our City was stuck in a period of low development growth amid rapidly rising services costs. Council was under considerable pressure, faced with either dramatic service cuts or a sharp tax rate increase to property owners. At the same time, a group of contractors who had a history of developing property in the City, as well as providing roadway maintenance and underground infrastructure services to the City, approached several Councillors to complain about how "difficult" our professional staff were to deal with. In particular, they identified the Head of Engineering and the Chief Building Inspector as problem employees and called for their immediate removal.

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

The Councillors involved were seen as being "business friendly" and in some cases, had well known and long-standing community relationships with these contractors. The individual employees involved were both somewhat reserved, soft-spoken, but very professional and dedicated employees.

The group of Councillors requested a meeting with me to demand that I "fix" the situation, which I interpreted to mean dismissal of the employees.

How did you respond to or address the situation?

My approach was to request time to investigate the complaints. I organized a meeting with the group of contractors to hear their complaints and to record their version of events which led up to this conflict. At the same time, I met with the employees to make sure their side of the story was also captured. I concluded that the City employees were simply following good contract management practices, administering City policies and ensuring that contractors lived up to their obligations, including enforcement of financial penalties, where appropriate. Both were performing their duties in the best interest of the City. Following my investigation, I informed the Councillors of my findings and also made it known that I would not be doing anything other than ensuring that good communication flowed between the City and the contractors, but that no disciplinary measures were going to be taken because there existed absolutely no grounds for such steps.

What lessons did you learn from this scenario?

I learned that elected officials can at times be influenced by their own network more than the staff of the municipality. In many cases, Mayors and Councillors have little management experience nor background in operating large organizations where policy, procedure and standards are normal. Often times their solutions are simplistic for complex situations and for the most part, they want problems to go away but are commonly misguided in how to make that happen effectively. In this case, they were easily influenced by these business people and gave them more credibility than the professional staff.

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

I have found that everything is built on a foundation of trust between the administration and the elected officials. Maintaining objectivity, making decisions based upon factual information, allowing people to have their say and share their perspectives, active listening and always remaining fair are critical to keeping that level of trust. It is also very important to protect employees from political criticism and to coach them in best practices in dealing with elected officials. I have also observed that some personality types will jump to a solution before adequately examining a problem, which leads to potential conflict when there is a difference of opinion.

In this case, the complainants did have some legitimate observations, but they were easily addressed with clearer communication practices and reinforcement of the municipal standards. The elected officials were also satisfied that the complaints were being dealt with and they accepted the outcome even though they had jumped to a "solution" beforehand.