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Councillors tussle over bid to take part in environmental assessments



JANECKI

Robert Wilson/Record staff
Zyg Janecki

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KITCHENER — Coun. Zyg Janecki is crying foul after losing by one vote a bid to bring more openness to the planning for city projects that are now handled in private meetings between staff and consultants.

Cambridge, Waterloo and the region allow councillors to participate in meetings with consulting engineers when environmental assessments are needed for new roads and other projects. In Kitchener, elected officials can only attend if the project is considered very complex. That means they cannot have any influence on setting up environmental assessments for the vast majority of projects.

City councillors were not involved in any of the groups setting up and overseeing the environmental assessment for the southward extension of Strasburg Road. And that means no changes can be made to the studies now underway. Councillors can only make changes to environmental assessments if they have been involved from the very beginning.

“Because of this, council should sit on these steering committees from the beginning and it should be the ward councillor,” Janecki said.

Councillors should be representing the interests and concerns of their constituents at the meetings when the consultants are first brought in, he said.

“I get invited to sit on two or three project teams at the region, but I don’t get invited to sit on anything at the City of Kitchener,” Janecki said. “At the City of Kitchener, we are told not to sit on anything.”

Janecki’s proposal to change that was approved in a 6-5 vote. But then Coun. Paul Singh complained that he didn’t understand the vote and did not mean to support it. Mayor Carl Zehr immediately called another vote, Singh voted no, and Janecki’s proposal was defeated to 6-5.

“That ticked me off,” Janecki said.

This issue has arisen because of the long-planned extension of Strasburg Road. When Coun. Yvonne Fernandes, a vocal critic of the project, asked for changes she was told it was too late because councillors were not involved in setting up the terms of reference for the environmental assessment.

When Fernandes supported Janecki’s proposal, she was told the idea amounts to micromanaging city staff.

“I kind of lost it actually,” Fernandes said. “This has nothing to do with a lack of respect for staff, but everything to do with accountability and transparency.”

Fernandes said when a project is occurring in her ward, she should be allowed to sit on the group that sets up the environmental assessment.

“In Waterloo, Cambridge and the region, they all send out an invitation,” Fernandes said. “It is an open opportunity.”

Coun. John Gazzola is furious at the way the recorded vote was handled at the last city council meeting and he complained to the city’s supervisor of legislated services.

“That leaves it wide open in the future. If you don’t like the way the results come up when they flash it on the screen, you change your mind,” Gazzola said. “You need to be stricter on that.”

Gazzola, a former chief administrative officer for the city and a 10-year veteran of city council, said another vote on Janecki’s proposal should not have been taken.

“They just can’t have another vote like that, especially when it is a swing vote,” he said. “It went from 6-5 one way to 6-5 the other way.”

Gazzola was told in an email that the second vote was appropriate.

“The municipal code “provides that if a member disagrees with the announcement of the results of a vote, that member may, but only immediately after the declaration of the results by the mayor, object to the results and require a recorded vote to be taken,” Colin Goodeve, the city’s supervisor of legislated services, said in an email to Gazzola.

“While typically this section would apply to situations where a verbal vote was taken, it establishes that it was within the discretion of the mayor to accept the request of Coun. Singh to immediately take a re-vote,” Goodeve said in his email.

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