

Civic reform starts with fewer city councillors

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When announcing his retirement last month after 18 years of distinguished service, Toronto councillor Kyle Rae was forthright about who he thinks is to blame for the city's troubles. Some of the harshest words were about his council colleagues: "They're only interested in maintaining the status quo in their small-minded residential neighbourhoods. They're not interested in the city; they're only interested in their neighbourhoods."

Rae is not alone in being concerned about the parochialism at Toronto City Hall. Here's a possible solution to this and some other problems with city council:

Cut the number of ward councillors from 44 to 22. Each councillor would represent a federal/provincial riding rather than half of one. This would substantially reduce the size of city council, which is too large for a body that has no formal political groupings. Montreal and Vancouver have overt party politics at the municipal level, but Toronto does not seem to be ready for this.

Add six councillors elected at large with a mandate to address city-wide issues.

Have one election for the mayor and these six councillors. Voters would have seven votes each for the at-large candidates. The candidate receiving the most votes would be the mayor; the next six would be the at-large councillors. The city would benefit from the service of several excellent but unsuccessful candidates for mayor.

Potential candidates for mayor who would not be interested in an at-large councillor position would not stand. This could be a good thing.

Give the six at-large councillors, together with the mayor, special powers in respect of city-wide planning issues. However, as a check on excess, each decision should require the support of a third of the ward councillors. Put another way, decisions about city-wide planning issues could be vetoed by two-thirds of the ward councillors.

City council adopted a useful definition of city-wide planning issues in 2008. These issues concern the whole city or are of potential interest to the whole city. They include "changes to key infrastructure, transportation and open-space systems," as well as land-use issues of city-wide importance. According to the city's rules, the chief planner decides whether a planning issue is city-wide or not.

The at-large councillors and the mayor would not have special powers with respect to approval of the capital and operating budgets. These and all matters except city-wide planning issues would be decided by simple majorities of what would be a 29-member council.

City council has the power to make some of the changes proposed above, although not for the 2010 municipal election. Provincial permission would be required for some changes. If the council elected in 2010 were to request such permission, it would likely be granted.

In the meantime, the whole city could benefit from robust debate during the coming municipal election period about the best structure for city council.

I would like the above proposals to be given fair consideration, but better ideas may well come forward. The need for reform is evident and urgent.

Richard Gilbert was a Toronto councillor from 1976 to 1991. He is now a consultant on transportation, energy and urban governance.