



Ethical advice for city council

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Five centuries ago, a brilliant and cantankerous theology professor translated the Bible from Latin into the German vernacular, allowing ordinary people to read the Scriptures for themselves.

Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546), is celebrated today as the leader of the greatest religious revolt in history.

On All Saints' Day (Oct. 31, 1517), he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenburg castle church. This treatise challenged the orthodox positions of the day and sparked the Protestant reformation, changing the course of western civilization.

Luther believed in the transparency and accountability of the powerful elite to ordinary citizens.

Many political organizations have since adopted his principles and tactics to reform their federal, state and local governments. Dictatorships became democracies. Fiefdoms beset by sectarian conflicts and cronyism slowly began to serve the people.

Ordinary citizens expelled officials who exploited their public office for personal gain. They introduced codes of ethics to ensure the rights of citizens always had priority. Interestingly, these reforms usually resulted in greater public trust and higher levels of voter participation in public policy issues.

During last fall's municipal election, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce waxed eloquent in its request to the province to introduce a modest set of conflict of interest reforms for municipal governments across Alberta.

In democratic Canada, federal and provincial politicians play by a rigorous set of commandments, similar in their clarity to Luther's 95 Theses.

These forbid officials from unduly influencing decisions. They can neither manipulate others nor allow themselves to be manoeuvred to vote in favour of projects or land developments where they (or families and friends) can make money. The canons also protect citizens from undue influence by elected officials.

No such strictures on transparency and accountability bind our local politicians.

Today's federal and provincial politicians swear to obey a code of ethics. Sadly, city hall does not have one for its elected officials. This is unfortunate because Calgarians only have their election day votes to hold the mayor and alderman accountable for the good and bad decisions made during the previous three years.

The Chamber knows city hall faces some tough, highly unpopular fiscal decisions and it wants to ensure that politicians are protected from any appearance of impropriety. Nor, it quickly adds, is it aware that any members of city hall have not acted according to the highest of ideals and with the best of intentions.



Last October, the Chamber called for the premier to appoint a municipal ethics commission to oversee a conflict of interest registry for all elected officials, provide advice to politicians about transparency and accountability and investigate alleged breaches.

All it takes is a modest reformation to bring local governments under the same or similar commandments the federal and provincial jurisdictions have:

- Amend the Municipal Government Act to prohibit use of insider information and outside influence to enhance personal portfolios. Appoint a Municipal Ethics Commissioner to maintain a conflict of interest registry and provide training for government officials.
- As city hall grapples with decisions about pesticides, taxes, snow removal, LRT lines, affordable housing and countless others, the Chamber believes a code of ethics will enable Calgary's politicians to make excellent resolutions for this city's future.

The Chamber has figuratively nailed its treatise to the door of council's chambers.

Will this spark the kind of modest reformation we need to transform Calgary into the energy renaissance city of the 21st century?