



7 November 2016
His Worship Jim Watson

cc. Ward Councillors, Minister of Municipal Affairs, Ontario
Attorney General, Ontario

Re: Membership and Terms of Reference for Ottawa's new Planning Advisory Committee

Dear Mayor Watson:

It would be a pity to let a good opportunity go to waste.

Bill 73, the Province's "Smarter Growth For Our Communities Act", requires most of Ontario's cities to create Planning Advisory Committees (PACs) or their equivalent if they do not already have one. The goal is to give residents a greater say in how their communities grow. You and the City have already declared Ottawa's consultation objectives consistent with this direction.

Unfortunately, the proposed structure of Ottawa's PAC would not do much to improve the quality of interaction between the City and its residents on planning matters.

If the City's PAC is to help achieve both the City's and Provincial public engagement objectives then a majority of the PAC's membership needs to come from the community, not from the City administration, and the Committee must have real work to do.

PAC Membership Composition

There's no risk to City leadership by increasing public membership in the Committee. As the Act makes clear, PAC decisions and recommendations are not binding on Council. They therefore do not and cannot wrest decision-making authority from City Council or staff. As we see it, adding more public members to Ottawa's PAC produces greater transparency and better-informed decision-making while at the same time maintaining responsibility with City decision makers.

As the Province has also specified, “councils determine which planning matters PACs can review/provide input”. That being the case, PACs should only address issues judged useful to Council and city planning staff.

Moreover, increasing the number of public representatives so that they constitute a majority would also resolve a concern raised elsewhere that the Ottawa PAC’s composition, as proposed last week by FEDCO amounts to decision-makers advising themselves.

PAC Terms of Reference and Work Plan

The PAC’s proposed Terms of Reference and Work Plan sets out only that the committee is to provide “advice on issues pertaining to the annual work plan of the Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Department as it relates to planning matters and such other planning matters as Planning Committee, Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee or Council may specify”.

If Ottawa’s PAC is to be genuinely productive and useful, it needs to do much more than a once-a-year review of the planning department’s annual work plan.

Several other Ontario municipalities mandated their PAC’s to undertake useful activities.

We are not suggesting that one size fits all and that Ottawa PAC needs to take on board the same projects as other cities but you probably would agree Ottawa’s PAC could do more good and useful work.

For example, the PAC could undertake an assessment of the effectiveness of the Planning Act’s new public consultation requirements, preferably semi-annually.

This would entail not just counting how often public input results in substantive change in staff recommendations and Council decisions but identifying discernible patterns as to the reasons why. The goal would be to get a better understanding of the effect and effectiveness of the public consultation process as well as of the ways in which it might be made more productive for all stakeholders.

Finally, we ask that PAC meet through the year, and that all PAC meetings be open to the public.

May we meet with you at your convenience to advance this matter.

Thank you for your consideration.

President, FCA Etc.