Democracy Should Begin at Thorold City Hall—and Independent Voices Matter

By Nicholas Bozza- October 2, 2026

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A Statistics Canada study released September 29, 2026, found that only 12% of Canadians aged 15 and older were very hopeful about how democracy would work in the future. Based on 2024 responses, 71% were a little or somewhat hopeful, while 17% were not at all hopeful. These findings describe national attitudes; they do not measure confidence in Thorold City Hall.

But they raise a question that belongs in every council chamber, particularly ours: **what happens to democracy when people begin to believe their participation no longer matters?**

In Thorold, my concern centres on the councillors I call the **UN-FAB FOUR: Councillor Mike De Divitiis, Councillor Nella Dekker (D'Epiro), Councillor Tim O'Hare and Councillor Ken Sentance.** Some residents I have spoken with also call them the "Rat Pack."

I use the UN-FAB FOUR as a metaphor for **a wall of votes**—the barrier residents can feel they face when they believe an established group will support the same outcome regardless of the arguments presented. There is nothing fabulous about public deliberation that feels like a formality.

Some residents, including seniors I have spoken with, describe that experience as insulting and belittling. Some have even used the word "abusive." Those are their descriptions of how they felt, and that frustration deserves to be heard.

A council chamber can have an open door and still feel like a closed system.

Residents may attend, speak and offer alternatives, yet leave wondering whether anything they said could have influenced the decision. Some taxpayers I speak with describe feeling exhausted, discouraged and tired of what they see as virtue signalling rather than meaningful engagement.

Some describe the experience as gaslighting. Apparently, that is one kind of gas work that does not require a pipefitter's licence.

Humour aside, their frustration deserves serious attention.

Many residents I have spoken with believe this describes an existing problem in Thorold. They question council voting patterns, accountability and whether their concerns receive meaningful consideration. These conversations inform my opinion, but they are not a representative survey or proof of how every decision was reached.

I encourage readers to ask their own questions. Speak with neighbours, examine council decisions and listen to people whose views differ from yours. Whatever you find, judge the evidence for yourself.

A little preparatory advice: pull up a chair. Some of those conversations may leave you needing a moment to catch your breath.

As for the Rat Pack comparison, the original group could sing, entertain and make an audience laugh. When Tim O'Hare or Mike De Divitiis tries to entertain, I would prefer a performance built around sound judgment, clear explanations and responsible decisions over a Rat Pack imitator.

Call me old-fashioned. Then bring me an Old Fashioned—with ice, please.

There goes the humour again.

Councillors can independently agree. A shared vote does not establish a secret arrangement. The public record should allow us to examine where these four agreed, where they differed, what explanations they offered and what consequences followed.

In my October 1 article, *"Thorold Deserves a Clearer Record,"* I raised concerns about how readily residents can find and follow individual councillors' votes and the reasoning behind them. Accessible records are essential if voters are to assess those patterns fairly. It seems to have been obstructed by the powers at be. Isn't the powers at be the FOUR in question?

Some residents suspect that limited visibility benefits incumbents by making their decisions harder to scrutinize before an election. That suspicion does not establish deliberate concealment. But the underlying accountability question remains: **why should residents have to work so hard to follow the decisions made on their behalf?**

When the record is difficult to navigate, incumbents may face less scrutiny than they otherwise would. One purpose of my articles is to bring those decisions into clearer view and ask for explanations.

The democratic in concern arises when the wall appears more dependable than the deliberation.

If residents believe a group's position is immovable, consultation can begin to feel like an exercise in speaking to that wall. Why research a proposal, prepare a delegation or suggest a better approach if you believe the outcome has already been settled?

Outside consultants raise another question: **when council commissions advice, is it prepared to reconsider its position—or is it seeking support for a position already taken?**

That question should be answered by examining the consultant's mandate, findings and effect on the final decision. Councillors remain responsible for explaining their votes, even when they rely on outside advice. It's no different than a clinical study, how it is done is assessed harder than the study's conclusions for validity.

In my view, the perception of a fixed voting bloc can weaken confidence in Thorold's government. It can also leave councillors outside the group appearing unable to influence decisions, even when they bring thoughtful questions or workable alternatives.

That is a difficult role to take on. I appreciate councillors who continue to question, challenge and offer alternatives despite those frustrations, including Councillors Anthony Longo, Carmen DeRose and Jim Handley.

Does this reduce voter turnout?

Many residents have told me they doubt voting will change anything. That discouragement deserves attention. However, those conversations do not establish that a voting bloc has reduced turnout across Thorold. But many think logic and common sense should prevail here even without a $50,000 consultant's study.

Ask people whether feeling ignored affects their willingness to participate. Their answers may be revealing, but even unanimous agreement among ten people would describe those ten people—not the entire city. Their reasoning may still offer useful insight. You be the judge.

If increasing participation is a priority, council should be willing to examine more than the convenience of voting. Early voting and other voting options address how people cast a ballot. We should also ask whether residents believe their ballot—and their voice between elections—can make a difference.

Questions about ballot security deserve clear, documented answers too. If a presentation to council raised concerns about voting procedures or safeguards, residents should be able to see exactly what was said, what risks were identified and how those risks are addressed, if at all.

My preference is for a durable paper record and clear instructions about the approved marking instrument. Polling stations should have enough supplies, and responsibility for providing them should be explicit.

I am tempted to suggest a $5,000 fine for whoever's job it is, if the forget the markers unerasable markers. Election integrity is also about election perception. That is frustration speaking, with a little humour attached. The serious point is that proper preparation and clear procedures help build confidence.

Making voting easier matters. Understanding why people feel discouraged matters too.

The Statistics Canada study found no association between lower hopefulness and lower voter turnout. Those who were not at all hopeful were more likely to participate in other political activities. Frustration can push people to demand change as well as tempt them to withdraw.

We would need local turnout records and evidence about residents' reasons for participating or staying home before drawing a firm conclusion about Thorold. Even a decline in turnout would not, by itself, explain its cause. But again, let common sense be part of the discussion and the solution.

A clear paper trail is hard to beat. Unlike a broken drum stick, it can still serve its purpose. There goes that humor again.

And before someone suggests adding $500 to the tax bill of anyone who does not vote, consider the better challenge: **give residents real reasons to believe their participation matters by giving access to all council votes on every vote in council.**

Could a wall of votes discourage independent thinkers from running?

Imagine a capable person considering public service: someone with experience, ideas and a willingness to do the work, who wants to assess each issue independently.

Ken Steeve a new candidate from Thorold is one example I have in mind, given his background in senior management at the Darlington nuclear plant. Other candidates also bring experience and abilities that deserve fair consideration with skills that lend themselves to being a successful councillor. The question is whether council offers independent thinkers a meaningful opportunity to contribute if they are not part of a voting bloc.

A strong prospective candidate might reasonably ask: **"Why invest years of my life if good proposals cannot get past an established voting group?"**

My concern is that the perceived wall could discourage precisely the people a council needs—people willing to question assumptions, examine costs and change their minds when the evidence warrants it.

Others might be motivated to run because they want to challenge that wall. We should hear from prospective candidates before claiming which effect has occurred in Thorold.

I have had some of those conversations, and I encourage you to do the same. Hearing someone explain what attracts them to public service—or what makes them hesitate—can be a cold-water wake-up call.

The stakes extend beyond any single council vote. They include who is willing to seek office, the quality of debate and whether residents believe their contributions can shape decisions.

The UN-FAB FOUR metaphor expresses my concern about what Thorold risks losing when a wall of votes appears to take the place of open deliberation. Whether that criticism is justified must be tested against the councillors' records and explanations. Another question is when a voting bloc is built, who pays for that wall? That's a fair question.

Every councillor should be able to stand behind their own vote and not hide behind a bloc. Every proposal should receive a fair assessment. Every resident should have a meaningful opportunity to be heard.

An open door is a beginning. What matters is whether people can get through to the decision-makers on the other side.

In closing, I want to thank the councillors who have continued to question and challenge the group I describe as a voting bloc. In particular, I thank Councillor Anthony Longo, who is not seeking re-election, for his service to Thorold.

And thank you to the residents who continue to speak up, ask questions and expect better. Independent voices matter—inside council chambers and throughout our community.

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