ARTICLE 3

Mission Possible: How Municipal Ideas Become Results

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Reader Erik recently emailed me asking how he could convince council candidates that downtown Thorold has a parking problem when, in his experience, some insist it does not. He also raised concerns about City-owned vehicles occupying prime downtown spaces overnight. He asked me to write about it.

Well, here it is.

His question points to something broader than parking: how do candidates assess a problem, develop a workable solution and include taxpayers in the process?

Whether the issue is downtown parking, municipal office space, deteriorating roads or a new city service, identifying a concern is only the beginning.

An idea is easy. A complaint is even easier. Delivering a solution requires evidence, a practical plan and the ability to bring the right information and expertise together.

Every election, voters choose people who will oversee substantial public spending and decisions that affect our daily lives. Yet campaigns can become contests of lawn signs, familiar names and friendly handshakes, with too little attention paid to whether candidates can do the work.

Those things may help someone win an election. They do not demonstrate the judgment needed to govern as a councillor in Thorold.

If we want better results over the next four years, we should treat this election as a serious hiring decision. Because that is precisely what it is.

The comparison to hiring a board of directors is useful: voters should examine each candidate’s experience, judgment, preparation and ability to hold an organization accountable. Municipal government has its own responsibilities and rules, but the underlying question is familiar: can this person do the job?

Understanding Who Does What

Council’s role includes setting municipal priorities, approving budgets, determining service levels and providing oversight. Municipal staff provide professional advice and manage day-to-day operations.

An individual councillor is not a CEO issuing instructions to employees. Effective councillors must understand how to pursue decisions through council and hold administration accountable through the proper channels.

That means asking informed questions, examining costs, testing assumptions and assessing whether recommendations address the problem and maintain monitoring the situation with metrics that matter and are easy to use ongoingly.

It also means knowing when to seek expertise—and being prepared to question that advice thoughtfully.

Council work demands research, financial understanding, communication and sound judgment. Candidates can develop those abilities through employment, business, public service, volunteering and other responsibilities.

The test is whether they can demonstrate those abilities and explain how they would apply them at City Hall. Ken Steeve mentioned that he knows how to navigate at work and know who to approach for each task and bring them to the table as his role as a senior manager at the Darlington Nuclear Power plant. This is an example of how details matter when managing a project that's never been done before on projects that exceed of the annual $60 million dollar annual revenue of the City of Thorold.

A résumé matters. What a candidate can do with that experience matters just as much—perhaps more.

The Puzzle Analogy: Making Taxpayers Part of the Process

At a recent councillor candidate event at the Thorold Senior Centre, Ken Steeve delivered a campaign speech titled "The Missing Piece," which I recorded and transcribed. He used a puzzle analogy to explain leadership and coordination.

I use his remarks here as an example of how a candidate can communicate with taxpayers and make them an actual part of the process. It is an approach worth examining and a standard worth applying to every candidate.

City staff, residents, downtown businesses, community groups and public agencies each bring different knowledge and experience. Those contributions are pieces needed to understand a problem and develop a solution.

As Steeve put it: "Not just identifying the pieces—but putting the puzzle together."

Bringing people to the table does not mean everyone will agree. The purpose is to identify facts, understand competing priorities, expose practical obstacles and develop an achievable plan.

Taxpayers should be able to understand the problem, contribute their knowledge, examine the options and see how their input affected the decision. Participation becomes meaningful when people can follow the process and recognize their contribution within it.

I look at it another way: producing a song.

The lyrics, melody, vocalists and musicians each contribute something distinct. Having talented people in the studio is a promising beginning. Their preparation, timing and coordination determine whether those contributions become music worth hearing.

The puzzle illustrates how the pieces fit. The music illustrates how they must work together.

Both require someone who can see the whole, recognize what is missing and help people contribute effectively.

Communication and the Ability to Navigate

One reason Ken Steeve's analogy caught my attention is that a component of my university thesis examined how to communicate with physicians and navigate through an incredibly complicated health care system.

That work taught me to appreciate the connection between communication and execution. A useful idea needs to reach the right people, be understood in the context of their responsibilities and move through the steps required to put it into action.

You must understand who has the authority to decide, who has the expertise to advise, who will carry out the work and who will be affected by the outcome.

Municipal government presents a similar challenge. Councillors need to navigate departments, budgets, policies, approvals and relationships while helping residents understand what is happening.

The comparison also extends to participation. In healthcare, a patient's concerns and circumstances need to inform the assessment and be reflected in the clinical record. At City Hall, residents' concerns should likewise be considered and reflected in the public decision-making process.

Listening matters most when it influences the work that follows.

A solid background in navigating complex organizations can help a councillor recognize obstacles, find the right expertise and keep a proposal moving. Clear communication allows taxpayers to understand that journey and take part in it.

Why Calibre and Background Matter

Ken Steeve's background in senior management at the Darlington nuclear plant provides one example of experience voters can examine for its relevance to municipal work.

Work in the nuclear industry demands careful planning, technical expertise, disciplined oversight and attention to safety. Mistakes can have serious consequences, making risk management and accountability essential.

Experience in that environment can develop skills relevant to municipal oversight: coordinating teams, examining complex information, identifying risks, monitoring progress and knowing when specialized expertise is required.

The scale and complexity of the projects Steeve describes managing help explain why he emphasizes detail, monitoring and follow-through. Voters should ask how that experience would translate into council's particular responsibilities.

Professional experience does not automatically make someone an effective councillor. It provides a record to assess: education, responsibilities, achievements and the ability to apply those lessons in a different setting.

When I listened to Steeve's speech, I understood his emphasis on coordination and follow-through as a standard he was setting for himself. His explanation gave taxpayers something concrete to consider—and something against which to assess his performance.

Every candidate should be prepared to offer that same clarity as Ken Steeve did.

Ask:

- Can they explain how they have handled responsibility and accountability?
- Can they identify weaknesses before those weaknesses become costly mistakes?
- Do they know how to bring the right people and expertise together?
- Can they explain complicated matters in language taxpayers can understand?
- Can they demonstrate follow-through after the announcement, approval or ribbon-cutting?

Candidates need not have identical careers. They should all be able to show that they have something useful to bring to the council table—and explain how residents will participate in their approach.

Ken Steeve identified: The Five Questions Every Candidate Should Answer

Before casting your ballot, ask candidates to work through a real municipal problem. Downtown parking provides a useful example.

1. What specific problem are we trying to solve?

A credible plan begins with a clear definition and evidence.

Are downtown spaces consistently full, or is the problem concentrated at certain times and locations? Is the concern availability, turnover, accessibility, enforcement or the placement of City vehicles?

If municipal vehicles occupy customer parking overnight, when are those vehicles moved? Does their presence affect business hours? Where else could they be stored, and what would that require?

A candidate should be willing to investigate before dismissing the concern or announcing a solution. Residents and businesses experiencing the problem should help inform that investigation.

2. What resources are required, and how should the solution be delivered?

Can staff address the problem with existing resources, or would it require additional funding, equipment or outside expertise?

What are the ongoing costs beyond the initial price? A proposal may involve maintenance, financing, enforcement or additional staffing.

A credible candidate should explain both the immediate expense and the continuing commitment in terms taxpayers can understand.

3. Who is responsible for implementation?

Which department would lead the work? What authority and approvals would be required? Would the Region, province or another organization need to participate?

Staff manage implementation. Council must approve the necessary direction and resources, then monitor progress through appropriate reporting.

Residents should know where to find updates and how to raise concerns.

If responsibility is unclear, accountability will be unclear too.

4. What are the trade-offs?

Tax dollars, staff time and municipal capacity are finite.

What would be postponed or reduced to make room for the proposal? Would it require higher spending, a service change or a different use of public property?

A credible candidate should explain the disadvantages and competing priorities as openly as the benefits. Taxpayers cannot meaningfully assess a proposal if they hear only its selling points.

5. How will results be measured and reported?

What would success look like, and when should residents expect to see it?

For parking, would the measure be improved availability, greater turnover, better accessibility or fewer complaints supported by occupancy data?

If costs rise or timelines slip, how will the public learn why? What corrective action would follow?

Completing a project does not, by itself, prove that it solved the problem.

Residents should be able to compare what was promised with what was delivered.

Hiring the Right Council for the Next Four Years

Accountability requires more than attending meetings and approving budgets. It requires councillors who prepare, ask useful questions, assess advice and follow through.

It also requires the humility to acknowledge uncertainty and reconsider a position when the evidence changes.

Voters have a role in that process. If we want competence to matter, we must examine it. Familiarity and friendliness can be part of our assessment, but they should be accompanied by scrutiny of a candidate’s record, abilities and answers—and weighed accordingly.

We should also make room for capable people from different backgrounds to enter municipal politics. A community benefits when candidates believe their preparation, experience and independent judgment will receive fair consideration.

For me, the important point in Steeve's speech was his identification of the voter as the missing piece. I took that to mean taxpayers must participate, assess candidates carefully and look beyond campaign presentation to the substance underneath.

His puzzle analogy communicated that role clearly. It gave residents a way to see themselves within the process and recognize their responsibility for the outcome.

That is what I want to hear from every candidate: how will you help taxpayers understand, contribute and hold you accountable?

Treat this election as a four-year hiring decision contract. Ask candidates to demonstrate that they understand the role, can assess a proposal and know how to bring the necessary pieces together.

The defining question behind any municipal proposal remains:

"What would it take to get this done—and how will we know it succeeded?"

All Aboard the SS Thorold

Think of our city as the SS Thorold. Councillors need the judgment to help chart its course, staff need the direction and resources to carry out the work, and taxpayers deserve to understand where the ship is heading and why.

A résumé can tell us where a candidate has sailed before. Their answers should tell us what they learned, how they navigate difficult waters and how they would use that experience for Thorold's benefit.

With capable leadership, clear communication and meaningful public participation, the SS Thorold can reach new ports of opportunity.

So, all aboard, I say—all aboard!

Bring your questions, your experience and your independent judgment. You are part of the crew.

For this article, "Mission Possible: How Municipal Ideas Become Results," credit goes to first time candidate Ken Steeve a life long resident of Thorold for identifying voters as the missing piece to complete the puzzle.

To borrow the famous Mission: Impossible briefing: "Your mission, should you choose to accept it…"

Voters must participate. Ask questions. Assess the people asking to represent you. And, ultimately, make your own informed voting decision.

Turning municipal ideas into results takes capable representatives and engaged citizens. Leave citizens out of the process, and the mission becomes more than difficult—it becomes impossible.

Put that missing piece into place, and Mission Impossible becomes Mission Possible.

Then, with the right planning, execution, accountability and public participation, Mission Possible can become Mission Accomplished with the taxpayers.

P.S. I leave you with a question: If you assessed the UN-FAB FOUR using the same standards Ken Steeve applied to himself—experience, judgment, ability to follow through and demonstrated results—how would they compare?

And suppose their compensation depended on the measurable results of the projects they supported, rather than simply serving a four-year term. How much would they have earned? Would the results justify full compensation, a portion of it—or nothing at all?

If that assessment left them owed nothing, would they be happy? (A little Brock University humor here) Would they seek another term under those conditions?

Municipal projects can pay dividends through better services, community benefits or responsible use of public funds. If those benefits did not materialize, would you, as a taxpayer, consider your money well spent? And if councillors expect compensation for their efforts, shouldn’t taxpayers expect results for their money?

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