

Fixing City Hall by Opening Government and Strengthening Fundamental Democracy

Democracy and good governance

The roots of democracy were based on direct involvement of citizens in their affairs: one citizen, one voice, one vote. Members of these simplistic and usually small communities had, more or less, full access to information related to factors contributing to the challenges that needed to be addressed and had direct input of how to overcome them. They were all accountable to each other and often directly subject to the outcomes of the decisions made at these “councils”.

As these early democratic societies grew in size and complexity it often became necessary to create other levels and processes of governance to meet growing and increasing difficult challenges for the benefit of all members of the society. Representative democracy was one of these democratic system refinements. As the representatives of these societies were generally known and respected to most of the people they represented in larger, overarching, democratic bodies their accountability was directly to the people they represented, and their credibility in the community was on the line. If these representatives did not act in accordance with the wishes of their communities they could be held to account very easily and the consequences very real.

Today, the continued increase in complexity and size of our democratic society and associated government responsibility has resulted in a democratic disconnect between government, representation and citizens. This drift is largely unavoidable as members of elected councils must carry out business of government, while representing the interests of often tens of thousands of constituents, adhering to proper process, avoiding liability and conflict of interest, considering and weighing the merit of substantial amounts of information and giving guidance to staff and the bureaucracy.

However, the fundamental functions and principles of representative democratic systems have not changed as they have been scaled up. Democratic systems must still make decisions in the best interest of their communities through meaningful dialogue, representatives must still act in the best interests of their constituents and citizens have the right to information about all of the factors influencing issues that affect them and still must still be able to hold government and elected officials to account. Over time the structures have become robust– bureaucracies have gained a degree of autonomy, processes have become more complicated and representatives have become more distant, all resulting in a democratic disconnect: citizens having less say in their affairs with less transparency and accountability.

Just as the definition of “citizen” has been redefined over time (to be more inclusive of members of the society to have their valuable input and points of view heard), so has been the structure and processes. However, often the structure and process expanded more robustly than the mechanisms use to hold those representatives and government officials accountable.

Fixing the governance structure was only the first step to fixing City Hall

In the previous platform plank release, a method of addressing the structure–based democratic disconnect was put forward through the empowerment of a more local form of governance, the community council. This opened the door for a greater voice in local affairs by citizens through governing bodies located in their communities where they could (as in days of smaller, more direct, local governance) know the issues first hand and have direct contact to elected representatives, which would make it easier to ensure they were acting in the best interests of their communities. This structural adjustment will make government more representative and more responsive.

But fixing the structure is only part of the solution. In many jurisdictions methods have been put in place to ensure processes stay transparent, citizens are duly and easily informed and thus are

able to hold representatives and officials accountable for their actions.

The health of democracy, the strength of civic engagement and innovation, and good governance all require the free exchange of ideas between citizens and government. Again, it requires that citizens be well informed and can have meaningful dialogue amongst themselves and with elected officials. It is critical that the culture of secrecy within which the HRM government has been working in recent years must come to an end. If elected mayor, I will open the doors to City Hall as has never been done, to all who wish to look inside.

Sunshine ordinance to open HRM governance

Upon taking the office of mayor I will work with the Province to amend the Halifax Regional Municipality Act to include a “Sunshine Ordinance” ensuring that it is potentially subject to the scrutiny of the Department of Municipal Affairs. I would then work with Council and citizens to open government under the principle that the Municipal government, as a publicly elected and funded institution, does not have the right to decide what the people should and should not know about their operations. In my view, this right of access supersedes any other policy interest government officials may use to prevent public access to information.

While the specifics of this Sunshine Ordinance (which I commit to champion) will be worked out with full, open, direct public involvement, they should at minimum include:

- The establishment of a Sunshine Ordinance Task Force made up of diverse members of the HRM community, none of whom may already be an elected official or an employee of the HRM.
- All public records must be made accessible for free or at low-cost as not to prohibit access.
- The freedom of expression rights of public employees, elected officials and community members must be both encouraged and championed.

- All regularly scheduled meetings must include time for the public to address Council about anything they wish, provided it is relevant to the Council's responsibilities.
- Meeting agendas are made public well in advance (24–48 hours) of all regularly scheduled meetings and once they have been published cannot be changed. All meetings of more than 5 Councillors where public business of any kind is conducted must have an agenda.
- Regularly scheduled meetings cannot be cancelled without the consent of the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, CAO and at least two Councillors. A meaningful and detailed written explanation for the cancellation must be made available to the public and press at the time of cancellation signed by the consenting officials.
- All meetings will be open to the public. An expedited schedule for the release of meetings records must be set at the time of the release of the meeting agenda and the date must be approved before the end of the meeting.
- Rationale for in-camera meetings must be more narrowly defined than at present. In the unusual case that meetings must be held in-camera the rationale, including the defined reason, should be made public. These meetings should be videotaped for the record. All records relating to in-camera meetings must be released after a set period of time (though may be extended based on defined rationale and under extreme circumstances). Items not on the agenda may not be discussed.
- All spending, including contracts (and their terms) and salaries (including allowances and bonuses), will become a part of the Public Record and released annually.
- All records will be available to the public with the access process well defined and transparent; access must be quick and not require unreasonable effort.

- All campaign donations, or other monies received outside of the campaign period, must be made public with 10 business days of their receipt.
- Any citizen or businesses seeking to do business with the city must declare municipal political donations (how much, to whom and the date) in the appendixes of their business proposals
- All votes in Councils, Committees and Commissions will be recorded and made public within one full business day to the public via a platform similar to, or potentially through, showofhands.ca so citizens may know the way in which their Council and Councillors voted in short order.
- For four hours a week (in addition to the time I will spend circulating in the community) and regularly scheduled meetings I will make myself directly available to the public at City Hall to come and discuss any relevant local issue for which the municipal government is directly responsible.

These are the principles upon which a new age of open governance will be ushered into HRM City Hall.

Begin examining the role and benefits of direct democracy through e-Government (Government 2.0)

I also feel there is the potential to begin to study and move towards a healthy degree of direct governance through e-Government platforms, also known as Government 2.0, defined as “The employment of the Internet and the world-wide-web for delivering government information and services to the citizens.” This mechanism of governance will undeniably play a major role in the future of democratic decision making. There have been very successful examples of e-Government working (including the writing of the entire Constitution of Iceland) and measured steps in this direction will not only place HRM at the cutting edge of open governance but will ensure that in the future citizens have direct say on issues that they see important. This move towards open

governance and experimenting with direct democracy (via e-Gov) will streamline our municipal system to regain many of the benefits to decision making that were inherent at the very beginning of democratic systems. I will present more details on the introduction and implementation of e-Government in HRM in the near future.

Good democracy depends on government making the most of citizens' points of view and experiences and using them to inform decision making. This requires representative and official accountability. It requires process transparency and easy and timely access to information so citizen oversight is possible. In this platform I have laid out how structure will be refined (empowering community councils), government will be opened and become more accountable (Sunshine clause) and a willingness to continue to move in this direction through innovative means (Government 2.0).

Democracy, good governance and the civic good of all citizens depend on it.

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