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Bonnie Hilford, Deputy City Clerk
City of Calgary
700 Macleod Tr. S.E.
P.O. Box 2100, Station M
Calgary, AB T2P 2M5

Dear Ms. Hilford,

RE: Presiding Officer Options for Council Meetings

Thank you very much for requesting a parliamentary opinion on Presiding Officer options for Council meetings.

My qualifications for providing this opinion are as follows: I am a Board Effectiveness consultant and a Professional Registered Parliamentarian. Since 1984, I have provided parliamentary services and support to clients from local government, school boards, first nations, and non-profits. I specialize in planning and conducting productive meetings, dealing effectively with controversies and disputes, and demystifying the rules of order. I often serve as a professional parliamentarian or as an impartial chair during client meetings.

Presiding Officer's Roles, Skills and Qualities

The performance of the presiding officer can have significant impacts on the effectiveness of a meeting. It can help achieve certain outcomes and prevent others.

Specifically, effective presiding can **achieve** the following outcomes:

- Orderly, well focused, inclusive, and well paced meetings (not too slow yet not too quick);
- The right balance between formal procedure and a reasonable amount of flexibility;
- Sensible resolution of tough issues in a civilized, respectful and safe meeting environment;
- Wise and informed decisions, benefiting from input from elected officials, staff, and citizens;
- Effective use of everyone's time and knowledge, thereby boosting morale and motivation;
- A substantial return on the investments of time and tax dollars.

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Moreover, effective presiding can **prevent** the following outcomes:

- Chaotic and disorganized meetings, or ones that are slow, unfocused and inefficient;
- An increased sense of confusion, low morale, and on-going meeting fatigue;
- An increased sense of 'why exactly am I here?' among elected officials and staff;
- Increased stress, due to the tolerance of a disrespectful tone and personal attacks;
- A potential liability due to a real or perceived gap in procedural fairness towards a citizen;
- Potentially flawed decisions due to valid input being suppressed by an unsafe environment;
- Possibly a reduced ability to attract good staff and have them function at full capacity.

In a pure parliamentary sense, the primary role of a presiding officer during meetings is to **look after the decision making process**. Specifically, the presiding officer is required to:

- Enforce core parliamentary principles in a correct but also sensible and nimble manner;
- Uphold the principles of fairness, equality and common sense (e.g.: prevent domination);
- Keep a meeting moving at a comfortable and appropriate pace (not too slow nor too quick);
- Balance the need for full and inclusive debates with the need for good time management;
- Maintain order, civility, and decorum, especially in the face of divisive issues;
- Prevent and/or deal graciously, judiciously and firmly with damaging breaches of process;
- Maintain a clear focus on the issues at hand (minimizing digressions from the agenda);
- Ensure that valid viewpoints, perspectives and insights can safely emerge;
- Obtain input from elected officials, municipal staff, and the public at the appropriate times;
- Promote the achievement of fully informed decisions in a democratic and efficient manner.

Looking after the decision making process and performing all the above duties may not be difficult in a perfectly harmonious setting, where divisions of opinion are a rarity. However, in a political setting with outside pressures and a divergence of views, the task of looking after the process requires conscious and sustained efforts. It requires a presiding officer to be **procedurally objective** and not be distracted by his/her biases on **substantive issues**.

With the above analysis in mind, the question is: Who is the most logical choice to serve as a presiding officer? Who would have the greatest capacity to fully look after the process during meetings? Would it work best to have the Mayor serve in this capacity, or should another arrangement be considered (such as a chosen Councillor, or perhaps an outside party)?

Option 1: The Mayor as a Presiding Officer

It is rare to see a Mayor being elected due to his or her passion for the parliamentary process and for his or her excellent presiding skills. More typically, Mayors are elected for the vision they articulate and their effective advocacy of compelling causes. A passion for the decision making process and a full appreciation of its power are not instinctive to most civic leaders.

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Given a Mayor's intense involvement in the affairs of the municipality, serving as a highly visible spokesperson for Council, and leading the charge on specific issues, it would likely be impossible for him or her to not have strong opinions or biases on issues that arise at a Council meeting. To require a Mayor to be entirely objective on all issues and to be devoid of any bias would likely be unrealistic and unsustainable.

With the Mayor's potential absence of objectivity on **substantive issues**, is it possible for him or her to be impartial as far as **the process** is concerned? Yes, but only if the Mayor has a full appreciation and respect for the process, a determination and the capacity to look after the process, and an undertaking to never allow personal biases to undermine the process.

Specifically, a Mayor who serves as a presiding officer should consider these do's and don'ts:

- Act humbly and respectfully and as a builder of Council as a team of equals;
- Celebrate diversity of opinions and avoid dismissive comments towards political partners;
- Celebrate successes and showcase achievements of Council members;
- Generally avoid being the first speaker in debate (especially on divisive issues);
- Keep your own comments brief and to the point (no rambling);
- Be patient with speakers and resist the temptation to prematurely interrupt them;
- Resist the temptation to offer instant rebuttals to statements you disagree with;
- Avoid chatty and casual remarks or questionable humour;
- Avoid becoming emotional or defensive when you do not prevail;
- Know when to invite knowledgeable staff members to share relevant input;
- Resist the temptation to 'fly solo' and make unilateral rulings without staff's advice;
- Avoid behaviors that can create a toxic environment and inadvertently block valid input;
- Possibly vacate the Chair and allow a Councillor or an external presiding officer to preside (especially when your personal biases are too strong to preside effectively);
- Obtain feedback on your presiding style (from Council, staff, or outside experts).

Option 2: A Councillor Presides

If and when a Mayor's substantive biases are too strong and may substantially reduce his or her capacity to be fully objective and uphold the integrity of the process, someone else should preside. This can be done on an as needed basis, or possibly on a regular basis.

Given that Councillors are less likely to be as intensely involved in the affairs of the municipality as the Mayor, having one of them serve as presiding officer may reduce the likelihood of personal biases interfere with the presiding roles.

If a Councillor is chosen to serve as a presiding officer, she or he should follow the same do's and don'ts that are given under option 1.

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A variation on option 2 is having the Mayor and all Councillors taking turns presiding. This approach can boost the appreciation of the complexities of the presiding role, and can lead to a more willing and even enthusiastic compliance with the process by all. However, the inevitable inconsistencies in presiding styles can make things confusing and ineffective (unless presiding officers are regularly given constructive feedback on their performance).

Option 3: An Outsider Presides

Having an external presiding officer, likely with expertise in parliamentary procedure, would enable all Council members to participate in debate as fully as the rules permit, while leaving the task of looking after the process to a professional who specializes in presiding and in leading group decision making. Such a professional would be fully dedicated to looking after the process, without any possibility of being distracted by biases on substantive issues.

Option 3 would come with a cost. However, this cost may deliver substantial returns on investment, and may pale in comparison to the potential waste, risk and liability that could be encountered as a result of ineffective presiding.

As with option 2, option 3 can potentially be applied to all Council meetings, or only to ones that are anticipated to be controversial, or when there is significant community turmoil in advance a public hearing. Option 3 may also be applied to meetings in which the usual presiding officer would likely be distracted by personal biases, and therefore have a reduced capacity to focus fully and effectively on the presiding role and the decision making process.

In Closing

I hope the above analysis of presiding options is helpful. Please feel free to contact me if you require any further clarifications or additional advice. Thank you again for the opportunity of providing service to the City of Calgary.

Eli Mina, M.Sc., P.R.P.
Board Effectiveness Consultant &
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