

Communication is key

In my 15 years as a community newspaper reporter, I've covered council in several different communities, including McNab-Braeside, North Grenville, Merrickville-Wolford and Mississippi Mills. One of the constants I've seen over the years is the struggle for public engagement and attendance at council meetings.

Let's face it, most council meetings aren't the most exciting way to spend an evening, but they are informative and a good way for citizens to take an active role in what's happening in their communities. Most often it's a divisive issue that brings people out and then you won't see them for another six months until the next thing fires them up.

However, over the past year in Mississippi Mills, there has been standing room only in the council chambers, which I believe is a positive thing to see residents interested in how their tax dollars are spent. While the interest began right around the same time as council was considering the sale of Don Maynard Park in spring-summer 2016, it has continued. It's nice not being the only person in the audience for a council meeting, but there are pros and cons to such a large crowd and I don't think either group (residents and council) have been sending the right message.

When you are passionate about an issue, frustrations can take over, but just because you disagree on an action that's taken doesn't mean a council meeting needs to turn into a shouting match, with jeers from the crowd at every time council makes a decision that's not preferred by the gallery. However, stationing OPP officers at the door of each meeting doesn't exactly provide a warm welcome to the public either.

It's good for us to be critical of our elected officials; after all, we elected them, but at some point actions can backfire and cause the opposite effect.

Take, for example, council's recent changes to its procedural bylaw that don't permit any recording devices within council chambers. I can understand the impetus behind it, but the message is negative. As a member of the media, it also muddies the freedom of the press issue. In this



ASHLEY KULP

The Usual Kulprit

day and age of technology at our fingertips, I still rely on my shorthand skills to take notes during meetings, but I have recorded sessions in the past if there is a contentious issue, to ensure I get all of the comments down correctly. No longer having that opportunity does affect the way I do my job.

Looking at other area municipalities, Carleton Place passed an audio and video recording policy in January 2015 that allows media to record meetings. In May of this year, they went a step further by banning council members from having their cell phones during meetings. Staff and members of the public are still permitted to have their phones in council chambers, but they must be turned off or switched to silent.

There is an opportunity to change the dialogue in Mississippi Mills. The municipality is currently in the process of establishing a new communications plan to better inform residents and recently completed a public survey seeking feedback on how they could make changes. I think this could be a very important document for the municipality as it moves forward.

I don't know if this falls under the procedural bylaw or communications plan, but currently there is no opportunity for residents to ask questions of council during council or committee of the whole meetings. That may be a way to better engage with members of the public. In North Grenville, which is a municipality similar in size to Mississippi Mills, their meetings are structured in such a way that after each committee's business (finance and administration, parks, recreation and culture, etc.) there's a period of questions from public and media on agenda items. And people take advantage of it. This could be an option for Mississippi Mills to explore.

Whatever the case, I look forward to seeing the outcome of the communications plan.