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Who Cares about the City Budget? by Alexander Aronec

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NO COMMENT



On June 22, the City of Ottawa is conducting what they are calling a "Financial Sustainability Summit". This gives us, the everyday citizen the opportunity to ask the city to explain, justify or just question "future budgets, financial decisions, and the long range financial plan". Your input will assist the "City of Ottawa's Audit, Budget and Finance Committee and City staff". I am sure that everyone in the area Kanata, Stittsville and March/West Carleton who has a concern about how the city spends and will spend tax dollars has submitted their questions haven't they?

In order to submit a question, you have to be aware that the session exists in the first place. Problem 1, the city assumes everyone has a computer and is only accepting questions via electronic means. I know of a lot of people who don't have regular or any access to a computer, I am sure you do too. Is it fair to exclude them from participating?

Just out of interest, I decided to see where the summit was mentioned such that those of us in the west would have found out about the Summit other than the City of Ottawa website. No mention was found in the June 10, 2010 West Carleton Review or Stittsville News; June 10, Kanata Courier "Community Notes" states: "June 22 – Financial Sustainability Summit, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.,"; but there is no mention in the Kanata Council Notes section; Nothing in the June 3 West Carleton/March Council Notes in the West Carleton Review [no June 10 entry].

I then went back to electronic mode and searched the web. Neither Mr. Qadri, Ms. Wilkinson, Ms. Feltmate nor Mr. El-Chantiry's, City of Ottawa paid for web sites makes reference to the summit. Ms Leadman, the Council representative for Kitchissippi has a good, very descriptive page on the summit on her web site, as does Georges Bédard in Rideau-Vanier. Others may make reference, I stopped at 2 that did after 4 that didn't. The April 26 edition of the Citizen makes mention of the event but the focus of the article is on OTAG, and OTAG does have significant references to the Summit on their website, but that assumes you go to the site. I couldn't find any reference in the Sun.

Let us assume that you did find out about the conference and decided that you wanted to submit a question or two, as I did. One June 3, I tried to submit a question. The City of Ottawa website stated that you could enter any question up to 250 words in length. I started to type my question and to my surprise, only could enter a few lines of text, certainly no where near 250 words. I tried again, same thing. I changed browser type, same thing; changed computer and browser type and operating system, same thing. I decided to put in a short question/comment stating that there was an issue.

I won't fully assume I was the only one who reported this, but on June 10, I got a reply from the City saying "Seems to work fine now". Great, off I went to the site and what they had done, was on the question entry page, altered the text to say 250 characters. Ok, so they changed the text to fit the design rather than the design to fix the text. I assume somebody somewhere made that call. Unfortunately, the screen which points the user to the data entry screen still stated: "Questions should be simple and straightforward and any explanatory material not to exceed 250 words". This time, I replied to the originator via the City Website and via email where I bcc'd several Audit, Budget and Finance Committee and mainstream media personnel. Did I get a reply – No, did they make a change – yes, the page now states 250 characters.

I also sent the following questions in the email:

1. Is 250 characters really a valid length for significant budget questions?
2. Has the sizing issue been raised to the Budget Committee and are they aware of the limitations imposed?
3. I still have not got an answer as to why it was put up untested in the first place and why it seems to have only been my challenge that pointed out the problem.
4. I may regret asking, but will the questions to be asked be posted BEFORE the meeting so that people can see what is being asked? I presume some form of filtering is taking place, but what assurance do citizens have as to the selectivity of the questions to be asked and answered?

I have not, as of noon, June 15, received a reply from the city. Does this give you the impression of an organization which, when subjected to a performance review would be categorized as "Performs adequately only when fully supervised"? If you are interested, the full history and images are on my web site.

Last, I should point out that both Ms. Feltmate and Mr. El-Chantiry are members of the Audit, Budget and Finance Committee while Ms Leadman and Mr. Bédard are not. Ms. Feltmate, as a personal choice, will not be returning to Council after the upcoming election. Those in Ward 5 can determine if Mr. El-Chantiry should as well.