

BIA's present cost saving measures to Council



By Andrea Steenbakkers, Executive Director Barrhaven Business Improvement Area
EMC News
December 13, 2007

The budget deliberations by Council are winding down for another year. The Councillors listened to three long days of residents and interest groups who took the time to show up and explain to the City why certain services should not be cut or why rate increases should not be imposed. The Ottawa Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) had our annual budget meeting a couple of weeks ago to organize a unified position in support of protecting the interests of the business owners in this City. Businesses in Ottawa provide a large majority of the City's tax base but do not get a vote and therefore are always at the mercy of staff and Council. As BIAs, we work with the City every day and we know that there are efficiencies to be found by systematically examining the City's business processes.

Public Consultation, the City's politically-correct process of covering their "behind" in their risk adverse culture, has increased to an unreasonable level- one that is both wasteful and inefficient, sometimes tying up projects for months or even years more than is necessary. I cannot tell you how many Open House Public consultations I have been to where there were as many or more staff and consultants as interested residents. Each time the City has an Open House, it is advertised for several days in the Ottawa Citizen at thousands of dollars per day and mailed circulations are sent to affected residents. Often, owners have numerous properties in the area, yet all of their City correspondence would go to one fixed address. This person would receive not one but numerous copies of the same letter, depending on the number of properties they own in the given area! Fixing this, would take a simple merge and purge of the mailing lists. Adding to these costs are the formal presentation boards prepared and displayed around the large, rented meeting room at the Open House. Perhaps there is a better, more efficient, way to keep those few engaged residents involved? The City's website is excellent, user-friendly and comprehensive. People need to look there for information. It is free and it is accessible at anytime of any day.

This is but one minute part of the City's business so what other cost savings are waiting to be found? Here are only a few of the suggestions made by the BIAs to Council at the Committee of the Whole consultations last week;

- Reduce overtime expenditures by implementing a comprehensive process of checks and balances in order to ensure that departmental overtime budgets are not exceeded.
- Reduce the number of programs and services by 10% through identifying duplication, twinning opportunities and underutilized programs and services (currently, the City delivers 105 programs and services).

- Reduce spending in provincially mandated programs to the provincially harmonized standards (compared to the 7 city average, Ottawa spends more in every comparable area except for long term care and public health).
- Reduce renewal and lifecycle costs by selling City Housing Units and accelerate sale of City of Ottawa buildings and facilities .
- Reduce the \$1 billion compensation component of the budget by maximizing attrition, early retirement incentives and packages, hiring contract workers where possible, employing alternative service delivery, identifying redundancies and not filling positions that have been vacant for 6 months or more with the exception of emergency services.

BIA's are the most successful public-private partnerships the City has ever entered into. Collectively, we fund two thirds of Ottawa's street beautification projects and invest in banners, decorative lighting, flowerpots, and monuments. Some core area BIA's are augmenting Police services by providing their own security. This saves the Police hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, and allows them to use their existing officers elsewhere. Ottawa's BIA's are investing hundreds of thousands of dollars in Graffiti clean-up. We invest in festivals and cultural events that attract tourists to the area. Our members create jobs, support local charities and amateur sports teams. We add value.

While we don't have a vote, we do make a difference in making our communities, and our City, vibrant, safe and beautiful. Support our businesses by insisting that the City; review its processes, its culture and organize attritional change. Granted, this is a more difficult, complicated and lengthy procedure than cutting services and jobs or increasing fees and taxes. However, it IS time to do something that will have a long term, positive effect on this City for years to come. Is this Council up to the task, are you?