

Toronto example shows ward-system flaws



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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

Good urban planning requires good civic governance. Under the perfect model of civic governance, elected politicians govern and non-political professional staffs manage.

That model has worked well in Vancouver for more than half a century. For the most part, city councillors stick to governing and some of the most creative professional civil servants in North America manage.

We only need to look around us to see what people the world over regard as one of the most livable and successful cities. Politicians and skilled civil servants, working with citizens in every part of the city, created the sound foundation and framework that allowed Vancouver to develop the way it has.

There are few others cities in North America that have experienced an inner-city revival on the scale of that which Vancouver has experienced. Fewer still have been able to attract such a huge proportion of people to actually live in housing within the inner city, experiencing a quality of life that really is unmatched.

Choosing a ward system to replace the current at-large electoral system in the City of Vancouver is a risky proposition, threatening good planning and quality housing.

The debate over next weekend's referendum question on the at-large system versus wards has been a low-key affair. The issue hasn't moved the public. But the stakes are high.

I initially found the idea of adopting wards a bit of a novelty — change for the sake of change.

Many long nights sitting at boring, drawn-out council committee meetings and public hearings across the city creates a certain cynicism about the current system of governance. The prospect of change is like a welcome breeze on a muggy day.

But my concern for the way we plan and design our cities, manage growth

and foster the development of quality housing in an urban setting caused me to really think about the risks inherent in abandoning a system that works, albeit with certain flaws.

With wards, the city will still function. The system won't wreak havoc on urban planning, but it will change it. Change for the better is fine, but I fear this change could be for the worse.

The biggest risk is that, under a ward system, councillors will begin to manage instead of governing. That won't be good for a city that needs to continue thoughtfully to manage urban growth.

Politicians don't thoughtfully manage. They micro-manage. They make mountains out of molehills and spend scant seconds on vital issues.

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External forces, which often have little to do with the development of good public policy, too often influence what ends up being strictly a partisan or emotional debate.

Former Toronto chief planner Paul

Bedford convinced me that we have a much better system in Vancouver with a city council elected at-large, compared to Toronto's 44-member council with councillors elected from 22 wards.

"Toronto's council micro-manages first and governs second," Bedford said. He said Toronto council's emphasis is on the local perspective at the expense of the city-wide big picture.

"Staff advice gets watered down in favour of ward priorities," Bedford explained, describing Toronto's dysfunctional governance model.

His description of vote trading and political brokering, which he said is rampant in Toronto, convinced me that much is at-risk under a ward system.

Councillors fear voting their con-

science and supporting what's right for the city as a whole when they know they "owe" another ward councillor their vote in return for a future favour.

That's no way to plan a city. So, as much as change might be refreshing, if only to shake things up a bit, why fix something if it's not really broken?

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