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FAST FACTS

September 17, 2009

The Councils of Women VS the Municipal Corporate Utility - One Woman's View

Last fall there was growing concern about a proposal to convert the City of Winnipeg Water and Waste Department into a stand-alone municipal utility and to seek a strategic partner to build and operate a sewage treatment plant. Some groups feared that this was the first step toward privatization of our water. I had seen none of the documents and did not know what to think. The proposal was accepted for further study before coming back to City Council.

The City hired a public relations firm at a cost of a quarter of a million dollars to sell the concept to the public. They did a lousy job. Public consultations consisted of two open houses held on two days of the same week at the same location. There were poster boards, cookies and soft drinks, but there was neither a verbal presentation nor a format for raising questions. I began to question city staff about things that struck me as contradictory. After being passed from one person to the next and ending up with Bryan Gray, the project manager, I found several of my questions still unanswered. Several motherhood questions were posed on the available questionnaire, and it was clear that *yes* answers to these questions would be taken as support for the proposal. By now irritation was added to my puzzlement, and I realized that the small space provided for comment

would not be nearly enough for me to express my concerns. I chose to email a response, which with later became an op-ed piece. At this time the business plan had still not been released.

Women from both the Council of Women of Winnipeg and the Provincial Council of Women and someone from the CCPA Mb. convened to discuss the situation. That was the first meeting of a group of women who would go on to accomplish some wonderful things. At our second meeting we came up with ten questions which we sent to the project team and to the press. They never got press coverage and we received no written response from the city.

We decided to hold a forum to give the public the chance to hear about the proposal and respond to it. We planned for two panels; one with Bryan Gray and his team on one side and three questioners on the other. We also planned to have written questions from the audience. Bryan Gray had agreed to attend an event on July 13th, then on the Thursday before the Monday forum, he informed us that they would not take part in a forum where there were other speakers, would not address policy questions and would not engage in debate. We still thought they might answer written questions. They refused to do even that.



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FAST FACTS continued ...

Close to 220 people attended the forum. Bryan made a power-point presentation and then addressed the ten questions we had given to him earlier, without really answering most of them. I spoke as chair of the Green Action Committee of the Unitarian Church, raising questions about the necessity of the change and the loss of transparency and democratic process. Jesse Hajer of the CCPA spoke of the problems with P3s, and Paul Hesse of the Sierra Club spoke of the legal complexities and costs of P3s. We made some attempt to address the questions, but we soon gave the meeting over to people to speak from the floor. Despite all of the road blocks, it was a good meeting, and a motion was passed that we should ask City Council to defer the vote.

A petition was then sponsored by various local groups, asking for the motion going to council to be delayed and a comprehensive consultation process to be set up. By July 22nd, when City Council met to vote on the proposal, there were about 4,000 signatures on the petition.

The proposal went to EPC on July 15th. There about 28 people who registered to speak. There were many excellent presentations, including one by Councillor Jenny Gerbasi and another by Jesse Hajer of the CCPA. The presentations stressed the lack of transparency and the lack of control over development in the Capital Region. EPC voted to send the matter on to Council but not without some reservations.

In the week before the council meeting, the mayor and his cabinet met for six hours to hammer out some amendments to the proposal, and local groups met with certain councillors. Gord Steeves would later say that they had listened to the concerns of the delegations and that their amendments were made in response. We were sure five councillors would vote against the proposal, so we focussed on the four who might waiver. The strategy did not work. On Wednesday July 22nd, council met to vote on the two part proposal.

Again there were many excellent presentations against the proposal, including a rousing speech from a University of Manitoba student. It was another long day.

Motions by councillors Gerbasi and Orlikow to defer the vote and change the proposal to be more like Manitoba Hydro were defeated. Harry Lazarenko moved that water should never be privatized without a referendum. The motion passed. There were other motions made in response to the presentations of those opposed to the proposal that would require two things to come back to council- the extension of services to neighbouring municipalities and the formation of public private partnerships with the utility. The amended proposal was passed 10 to 6.

The only councillor won over by the presenters was Russ Wyatt, who had attended our forum. In his summary speech he asked the same questions we had raised and got no answers. Those who opposed the utility did not win, but City Council heard the concerns, and possibly the amendments mean that some crucial elements are still to be decided within the public arena.

The action now shifts to the provincial jurisdiction. Those who still have concerns should contact the Premier, the relevant ministers and their own MLAs. They should also come to the Sept. 21 event with Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians, Jenny Gerbasi, city councillor, and Lynne Fernandez of the CCPA Mb.

Carolyn Garlich is Chair of the Green Action Committee of the Unitarian Church of Winnipeg, a member of the Council of Women of Winnipeg, and of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Mb.



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