

Audit city auditor

CALGARY HERALD APRIL 20, 2010 6:30 AM

As strange as it sounds, an audit of the city auditor is needed. The external auditor, to be chosen this week to review Calgary's audit department, will hopefully prescribe a meaningful overhaul of the office and its underperformance.

The city's audit department needs to be more productive, accountable and independent. It promised 19 audits in both 2008 and 2009, but completed just eight and five, respectively. In 2007, the office said it could conduct 27 audits, but managed to deliver just eight.

This year, 20 audits are scheduled, but only two have so far been delivered -- including a review of parking perks for city employees. That audit was indeed excellent, thorough and a good road map to transparency. It proved what we already know: checks and balances by independent auditors are invaluable tools to democracy. We just need more.

City Auditor Tracy McTaggart blames the underperformance of her audit department on staff shortages and difficulty hiring during the boom. The numbers tell a different story. Since the beginning of 2007, the office hired its full complement of 13 permanent employees, but lost 10 in the subsequent 39 months.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, an outspoken member of the audit committee, calls that sort of turnover "horrendous."

"I don't think we can blame the fact that we couldn't hire people. What it tells us is even when we did hire people, they didn't stay," Colley-Urquhart said Monday. "That's why this quality review is so important."

She wants to know: "What is going on? We need to get to the bottom of the efficiency of this whole office."

Staff shortages should have long been over by 2009, and indeed the audit plan was based on resources available at the beginning of the year: "The office had eight staff in the audit division and (we) forecast an availability of 1,440 person days, or about 75 per cent utilization rate," says the 2009 audit plan, a copy of which is posted on the city website. McTaggart estimated between 150 to 250 days needed to conduct a value-for-money audit, and 60 to 100 days for more focused reviews.

McTaggart, reached Monday, agreed productivity last year was lower than it could have been, but said the targets were "overly ambitious." She's confident the office is back on track. We're doing all the right things. I think the review will confirm that," she told a member of the Herald editorial board.

Council should remember the auditor bears only partial responsibility for the department's failure to deliver. The office may report directly to city council, but it's hardly independent considering it reports through the audit committee, which is comprised of two citizens but five members of council. Why have so many years been allowed to pass without the abysmal record of underperformance being addressed by the committee? If there were performance problems with the auditor, why were they not dealt with during yearly performance reviews by the chair?

Good public governance deepens confidence in government and public administration. Public confidence in Calgary's audit office has been shaken. In order for it to be restored, the quality assessment review needs to look deeper than the problems of the auditor and her department. It needs to examine the whole governance model.

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald