

# Council's group therapy aims for harmony

BY JASON MARKUSOFF, CALGARY HERALD    JANUARY 31, 2012



Beyond generic council cantankerousness, it's not clear what problems council suffered that led Mayor Naheed Nenshi to call in a professional facilitator to meet them Monday.

But the group showed signs of control issues, superiority complexes, denial and a bit of anxiety over Nenshi's unorthodox move to foster more group harmony.

It sure didn't soothe nerves that the facilitator happened to be a clinical psychologist.

Before the closed-door session - group therapy, if you will - began, Ald. Gord Lowe threatened to skip it because the confidential e-mail Nenshi had sent to aldermen gave him "very little comfort."

The frustration was mutual.

"I would find it extraordinary if any member of council did not want to attend a meeting on how council can work together better," Nenshi said, "but if members of council are interested in a dysfunctional group that is not working well together, it is absolutely their prerogative."

Six veteran aldermen voted against holding the private session, but no-body skipped the two-hour session.

Preceded by a weekend e-mail from the facilitator asking council members how they felt they work together and could improve, one might call it an intake session.

"Having gone through the process, I thought it was interesting," Ald. Gian-Carlo Carra said.

Council will debate at a committee whether to meet Dr. Ivan Zendel for future sessions.

The city's human resources department selected Zendel. His firm, Paradigm Solutions, offers corporate services such as facilitation and "team development," as well as psycho therapy, according to Paradigm's website.

Nenshi had long dumped on the Dave Bronconnier-era council for being bitterly partisan and dysfunctional, and had made it a priority to improve the tone when he took the helm.

Members do say the collegiality on council has improved vastly, with the group hardly ever divided into

hardened ideological camps.

But a toxic, closed-door session this month was marked by outbursts and tempers, and left at least one veteran administrator shaken.

It came the day members learned that a council aide had died unexpectedly, and after rookie member Carra's plans for a dramatic make-over for Mission Road was rejected following a lengthy hearing.

Sources say that evening prompted requests to Nenshi to try to resolve the tensions.

But bringing in a facilitator seemed to be the mayor's initiative, and the fact that a psychologist was meeting with aldermen took many off guard.

"To characterize us as dysfunctional, to characterize us as sliding into bad behaviour is completely wrong," Ald. Brian Pincott said of the mayor's accusations.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said Nenshi himself can do a better job of cooling down any passions.

"It's not that we don't get along," Colley-Urquhart said. "It's about leadership and how you chair a meeting."

Although this facilitated session was said to be prompted by private encounters, the mayor himself has been a player in some of the public flashes of council discord.

He's previously clanged swords with Lowe in council on issues such as the airport tunnel, and charged that some members treat "taxpayers like an ATM" during last fall's budget debates.

Unlike normal council meetings, where members collectively approve the agenda, Monday's was a special meeting, which meant Nenshi could unilaterally set the plan.

Ald. Andre Chabot tried to alter the agenda, but Nenshi interjected: "You can't."

Of the nine council members who served before Nenshi's 2010 election, six tried to vote down the private meeting: Chabot, Colley-Urquhart, Lowe, Pincott, Dale Hodges and John Mar. Three other veterans and all six newcomers voted to go in camera for the session.

First-termer Ald. Richard Pootmans struck a positive note after the meeting.

"There's a common drive to see if we can improve and be as good as we can be," Pootmans said.

Former alderman Joe Ceci, who served under Bronconnier and former mayor Al Duerr, was baffled when asked if a facilitator or psychologist had ever been tapped to meet council during his 15 years.

"Exsqueeze me?" Ceci asked. He said the mayor shouldn't be surprised that council doesn't get along perfectly.

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