

Response to Brodbeck - October 28th article

**Don't be flippant with water and waste
October 28, 2008**

Once again, Tom Brodbeck writes about an important public issue, from an overly simplistic point of view, and ends up spreading misinformation he accuses others of doing. In yesterday's column, Water and waste, he says "city hall must weigh all options," then he ignores the benefits of public water and waste systems, and implies private systems are more efficient.

First, water is an essential resource for our city that must be safe, accessible and affordable. Waste water treatment is equally important for the overall health of a community. Cost and efficiency are only two factors to consider in deciding how best to provide these services.

Second, the experience in many towns and cities across the country, and around the world, is that private companies can not assure the quality of water and keep costs down. We can site examples of private water systems failing, or cities taking back their water systems, because private water and waste delivery is not compatible with the well-being of the public. Control of the water supply is like allowing someone to control the air we breathe.

Third, if there is a bloated bureaucracy delivering Winnipeg water – prove it. Attacking staff in the Water and Waste Department, who are doing a great job of providing this important service, is irresponsible.

And last, he claims the privatization of garbage collection is saving millions and delivering the same service. If he knows something we don't – then say it. Our information is that costs and complaints about garbage collection have gone up since 2005.

If he wants to help the city weigh all options on providing such important services, he should at least contribute solid information. His simple thinking and assumptions don't help.

Mike Davidson
President, CUPE Local 500

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Water and waste

City hall must weigh all options

City hall may soon be debating the thorny issue of contracting out major parts of its water and waste department, the Winnipeg Sun has learned.

A new report that could be released as early as next month is expected to recommend how the city could turn water and waste into a stand-alone utility, including greater use of private-sector services.

It's expected to be the next big dust-up between unionized city workers and city hall, which has already contracted out all of its residential garbage pick-up.

The big difference this time is that water is a much more sensitive topic, and far more susceptible to misinformation campaigns.

I expect to hear a lot of "don't sell off our water" and "water is a human right" slogans if this goes ahead as planned.

What the city wants to do is find more efficient and effective ways of operating water and waste, which is facing massive cost increases from several planned mega-projects, including sewer and water treatment plant upgrades.

It's unclear how much of the service would be contracted out. But the city is already in talks with CUPE Local 500, which represents most city workers.

The problem with these debates is that they usually get bogged down in misinformation and fearmongering.

Remember all the stories about how garbage pick-up would deteriorate if it was contracted out city-wide?

Well, how's your garbage pickup lately? Pretty much the same as it's always been, right?

The only difference is taxpayers are saving a few million dollars a year now that the private sector is delivering the service.

One of city hall's biggest problems is that it's extremely bureaucrat-heavy. City departments are weighed down with so many middle managers -- supervisors, co-ordinators, analysts, team leaders, managers -- it's very difficult to run anything efficiently.

Take a look at any compensation disclosure report from the city and you'll fall off your chair when you see the hundreds of useless positions drawing \$50,000 to \$80,000 salaries. Any business would go broke in a week if it had the kind of administration city hall has.

One of the chief reasons some city services can be delivered at a lower cost by the private sector is because the private sector tends to cut out much of that middle management. The good companies do, anyway.

I know the unions don't like going through these contracting out exercises because it means they lose members.

But it's city council's responsibility to constantly look for new, more efficient ways of delivering city services, especially with the skyrocketing costs all levels of governments are now facing for major capital projects.

If city hall can find a way to deliver water and waste services at a lower cost to taxpayers -- without compromising service quality -- I say bring it on.

It's either that or dramatically increase taxes to pay for the mega-projects and other capital upgrades that lay ahead. And I think we've had enough of that.

Community poll

(at 10 am Tuesday, two thirds were against contracting out)

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