

## Saint John lines up its services ducks

BY BOBBI-JEAN MACKINNON  
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The city had some remarkably well with limited funds, but the risk of service failure is high and the ability to recover is low, says the consultant conducting an operational review of city services.

“Ten years of budget cuts have left this city exposed,” says Alan Mitchell, of Chartwell Inc.

“The city is barely able to repair assets let alone keep them to a reasonable standard,” he said.

“Staff...are doing a tremendous job, but are stretched far too thin to meet common council’s and the public’s expectations.

Mr. Mitchell has identified 19 high priority opportunities for improvement.

Among them:

- Implementing program and service-based budgeting;
- Establishing a communications unit, strategy and plan;
- Co-ordinating major developments;
- Enhancing bylaw enforcement;
- Redefining committees of council.

“These will mean systematic changes in the way in which we operate,” Mr. Mitchell told common council during a brief presentation Monday night.

The 19 priorities, whittled down from an original list of 233 possibilities, could also help the city qualify for Infrastructure Canada funding, he said.

Federal officials might see Saint John as the city that’s “got all its ducks in a row.

“They might say ‘Here’s a city that’s trying to move ahead on its own, maybe they are the ones to invest in.’”

Mr. Mitchell has also said he believes the operational review will give the city grounds to “renegotiate” its unconditional grant with the province.

As it stands, Saint John collects about \$45 million in commercial and industry property taxes, but only gets about \$17 million of that back from the province.

The city's operating budget is not even keeping up with inflationary cost increases, said Mr. Mitchell.

And the capital budget is seriously underfunded, he said, citing water and sewerage as an example.

In 2002, the estimated cost to replace water and sewer and infrastructure was \$500 million. The actual budget allocation this year is only \$15.3 million.

"At this rate, the capital replacement will take 33 years to completed," he said. And that doesn't include other capital costs, such as roads and facilities.

The implementation plan for the proposed improvements includes:

- Streamlined governance for faster, more informed decisions.
- Improved customer service through better access and proactive interactions with the public.
- Better planning, designing, constructing and maintaining of valuable assets to ensure a sustainable future.
- Enhanced application of integrated technology to support efficient and effective service delivery.

Mr. Mitchell plans to update council on progress with the operational review about every two weeks.

He expects his final report to be ready by September 26.

Coun. Glen Tait, who suggested the operational review and chairs the committee of council overseeing the process, plans to ask council to approve an additional \$20,000 to implement a communication plan for the operational review.

"We as an organization dropped the ball," he said, referring to recent negative media coverage about the operational review's vision statement for 2015 reading more like a tourism brochure than a plan for municipal management, being vague and wordy.

The review is the most important initiative council will undertake during its mandate, stressed Coun. Tait. "If we don't communicate the results effectively, it's a waste."

The operational review is already expected to cost between \$300,000 and \$350,000.

Coun. Chris Titus questioned why implementation of a communication plan was not included in Chartwell's original proposal.

Coun. Tait said the plan had been to handle it internally. "Unfortunately it can't be."

Unlike previous vision statements, the new one is the shared vision of council, commissions, unions and other stakeholders, he added.

The vision statement is: Saint John is the community of choice in Atlantic Canada. We are a safe city, in which citizens are proud and caring, focused on creating opportunity, growth and prosperity."

The city has had at least 11 previous vision statements, said Mr. Mitchell.

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