

UNDER SCRUTINY

City looking outside for inside review

Council may hire Toronto-based consultant, which did similar audit for Fredericton in 1998

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Seven years ago, Fredericton city hall went through a massive reorganization with the help of a Toronto-based consultant.

Today, Saint John is considering hiring the same company - Chartwell Inc. - to review all city operations.

Chartwell was one of two firms that responded to a recent call for proposals.

The city's five-member operational review committee, headed by Mayor Norm McFarlane, plans to meet with Chartwell officials next week. Mr. McFarlane said the review will include all services the city provides, whether it should be providing them, and whether there are any other services the city should provide.

City boards and commissions will also be a "very big part of it," he said. They administer 49 per cent of the city's budget.

"The (Chartwell) model has worked very well for us," said Fredericton city administrator Paul Stapleton, who met with Saint John officials last week to discuss Chartwell.

"I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to anybody."

It turned Fredericton city hall "inside out" in 1998, he said.

One of the key changes implemented after the review was reducing city departments from 11 to six, which created some savings, said Mr. Stapleton.

And the branches within those departments are now based on the service they provide to citizens.

For example, the transit department is now part of community services instead of transportation, and tourism has been moved from community services to development services.

A corporate services department was also established to provide common services, such as accounting and human resources, to other departments rather

Coun. Tait, who worked for the fire department for 34 years before retiring. "It's good to have an outside look."

And while city staff know what's going on in Saint John, they don't necessarily know what's going on elsewhere. Consultants like Chartwell do.

"I'm sure it's going to come back and say the city is doing a lot of things right, but there's always room for improvement."

Coun. Stephen Chase, who pushed for an operational review during his term on the previous council, commended Coun. Tait for championing the project.

"I think it's always important to deliver good service in the most efficient way - particularly where we just increased the tax rate by seven cents," said Coun. Chase, who sits on the operational review committee.

He estimates the review could take up to five months and cost up to \$200,000.

"It's serious money, but it's a serious issue," he said. "My view is if we're going to do this, let's do a complete review."

No money has been earmarked for the review in the 2005 budget. But finance commissioner Andrew Beckett said it could be paid for out of the \$535,000 set aside in a one-time writeoff fund.

The other firm that responded to Saint John's call for proposals was Perivale-Taylor, which conducted an in-depth review of the Saint John Police Force in 1996.

The other members of the operational review committee include Deputy Mayor Michelle Hooton and Coun. John Ferguson.

An operational review was proposed in 2002, but the former council rejected the idea. The mayor and several councillors said a review would be pointless given that they had already given instructions to the city manager to hold the tax rate and come up with at least \$6 million in savings.

Coun. Chris Titus had suggested the review.

He wanted to find out whether taxpayers were getting good value for the money they paid for services, given the long-standing arguments from Saint John's business community and the province that the city needed to make its operations more efficient.