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"This year's City Hall election is one of the oddest I can remember in some 15 years of my living in this town."

—a comment from a downtown resident re: municipal election set for November 15, 2008.

An Unusual Municipal Election Climate

By Diane Walsh

One thing's for sure. There's no dispute City Hall's in a bit of a dysfunctional mess. The joke around town is city workers run the place. Seems the Victoria Police Department is facing some struggles of its own listening to the recent, rather cliché, exposé. So who's running in Alan Lowe's place?

Oh, right. There isn't anyone. City politics tries to shy away from labels. But for the sake of simple explanation shall we agree, the 'liberal business' candidate is coming from outside—not inside—City Hall. It's a man named Rob Reid, owner of Frontrunner shoe store. Nobody can help but notice the metaphor. But is he really the frontrunner in the race? It's debatable. For one thing, the very councillors (we assumed would throw their hats into the mayor race) are instead, seeking to retain their positions, as councillors. Reports are, to continue on with the work they're doing. That's what we're to understand anyway.

Fine, but still—we can't help but notice that 'former-Alan-Lowe backers' on council are lying low in this year's election, so terribly low we can't even see them. For instance, who's gotten behind Reid from council? It's still an open question. Support certainly wasn't to Stan Sipos. Many people have begun to wonder if Sipos slighted a few core councillors by trying to get out front at the beginning, thus failing to seek the sanction and endorsement from City Hall veterans. Ah, but what can you believe these days.

Knowing of the exact movement of that past Lowe-support voters list would be a cheap thrill for any journalist!

Remember the catchy slogan that went something like, "we need to take our city back". Guess that's not going to happen—since Sipos' dropped out of the race. But Reid's in, right, to the rescue and backed by Sipos.

Regardless whether or not there is any agreement on if there is a cohesive 'liberal' front to speak of, there is—Dean Fortin. He holds this view: "I still believe we can have a just society". Good will and energy might just be what Victoria needs right now in dealing with these tangled political webs and challenging economic times.

Dean Fortin warns we should ward against an adversarial-style electioneering "so we don't get a downtown versus communities and neighbourhoods" vote dynamic.

It's hard to disagree his point that a polarizing of left and right would make it harder to solve Victoria's biggest challenges as many would agree are—affordable housing, better transit options, green building and development, and overall vibrancy for Victoria.

The topic in everyone's face is of course the sad reality of an ever-increasing number of street people. Homelessness.

And it hasn't gone unnoticed that there is a peculiar irony in Mr. Alan Lowe sitting as co-chair of the homelessness coalition (not to be confused with "commission", which apparently, it's not allowed to call itself) enjoying a salary when people are suffering in the streets due to a lack of action. This isn't to say there aren't good people involved [in the coalition] however forever compromised—they are—by the fact everyone now knows Lowe himself handpicked them. And what ever happened to the original grassroots [ad-hoc committee] anyway?

Lest we not forget—it was under Lowe watch that so-called street dwellers were (under the pretext of making City Hall look nicer to tourists) systemically displaced from 'his' backyard (i.e. Centennial Square) to—all—of downtown, including the business milieu and the near-by residential communities.

Fernwood is ever changed. Sweeping was a common practice of the Lowe-directed police rule.

Small business owners and health professionals near Cook and Pandora are beginning to speak out, complaining bitterly about having to pick up after the night's drug-use and demanding that heads roll for this fiasco. It may be that 'business' voters are more willing to consider someone outside the traditional 'all-business-liberal' camp if it means something—anything—moves forward to deal with homelessness and street drug abuse in a real way. "Like building a fully-equipped rehab hospital", suggests Norman Lee.

Fortin chimes in, "I, like others, have been extremely frustrated by the slow pace of action".

Fortin has many allies in the community and is seen as friendly to business. And he's not surrounded by scandal. His record is clean. Fortin says he's passionate about vibrancy and tackling social problems simultaneously defending the position that "solutions are not about displacement. We can't just do enforcement downtown. It's not about just dealing with the visible homeless, but the invisible as well—seniors and families. We need our housing-first approach for the homeless. We need to tackle those issues head on. We need to build 5000 units of affordable housing over the next five years. It's just a matter of will".

Going on to say, "I would welcome to bring the feds and the province back into the housing game but can't afford to sit back and wait and not take responsibility. We need real units on the ground, affordable market and non-market housing, working in CRD housing corporation which [includes] fund-raising".

Some people are surmising that with NDP-leaning supporters closing ranks Fortin has more than a fair chance of winning the mayor seat.

Georgia Jones ran for mayor of Victoria in the last civic election and got 140 votes. She may have joined the Green Party since then—and Ben Issit (who would have been Fortin's biggest contender) isn't running. Issit explains that, "Due to work and family obligations, it is unlikely that I will stand for election this year"—his absence from the race—a disappointment for some. And, well, GAP Ministries-affiliated John Turner (albeit nicknamed Idealist of the Year) it may not be enough to get elected. Then there's Simon Nattrass—his

involvement is but another oddity of the race in general. Good on youth for getting involved is all you can say there. It's got some people wondering if his role isn't to split the left.

Rob Reid, the man who's come to the rescue after the Sipos withdrawal, is but a mystery.

Does city hall support him? Haven't got a clue and haven't been able to find out either. Word has it he's interested in heading up policy that deals head on with the issue of panhandlers in front of shopkeeper's doors—in part—a response to LOJO (Lower Johnson Street) small business owners complaining to him directly about the ever-presence of street people. Definitely sensitive terrain.

It's worth noting that before Fortin's election to city council he served as a community member on the Victoria Police Board. This is an important tid-bit of information since we all know the police department needs an ethical mayor with strong leadership skills to guide through current squabbles...toward a higher purpose, that of community need-based policing.

Fortin's past but now useful "outside of the bee's nest" perspective—is clearly an asset. He says he favours a "more professional rather para-militaristic approach to policing" and supports "moving women forward and up the ranks".

Trained as a lawyer he ran the Burnside-Gorge Community Centre with its two million dollar budget, 50 employees and 10 million dollar asset base and with balanced budgets for several years. He notes that among other worthwhile neighbourhood-based programs the Community Centre specifically focuses on programs to assist the homeless and near homeless.

In addition, according to his website, "as a CRD director, Fortin is chair of the Regional Housing Trust, vice-chair of the CRD Housing Corporation, and a member of the Water Board. He also sits on the CRD's Liquid Waste, Environment, and Parks committees".

Seems like key political positioning for dealing with sewage infrastructure. Remember Fortin was in favour of sewage restructuring when others were waffling. He says he wants Victoria to become the social and environmental leader in Canada.

Ok. It's up to the people now. Where's the civic 'league' going to take us?

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