

Fearful councillors back down

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Byline: Roysen James Toronto Star

For once, they got caught feathering their own nests, this Toronto city council.

And this being election season, when one particular candidate is headhunting for politicians intent on self-aggrandizement, they've given up the chase, fearful of being exposed. In fact, they get caught all the time. But for once someone called them on it.

Actually, the city solicitor called them on it three or four times, all to no avail. City council simply ignored Anna Kinastowski; went over her head for a second opinion.

Barely 5-foot nothing, Kinastowski stood her ground. And now that the courts have backed her, councillors have finally started to back down from their contemptible stance. Monday, they quietly received a legal opinion from an outside law firm that told them to accept defeat and just go away. There is no basis to appeal the July court ruling slamming as illegal city council's vote to defend councillors caught up in election-expenses disputes.

"It wasn't working," admits Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone. "Nice try, but get on with life. There are more important things to debate."

Like a salary increase for the mayor? Well, no. That, too, was set aside by the executive committee Monday. Tossed to the new council; too hot to handle.

The legal fund matter goes to council later this month. A rearguard action can still resuscitate the proposal, but considering how politically toxic this has become, the proponents are more likely to slink away in shame.

City council paid some \$140,000 to cover legal costs for their colleagues who faced legal battles over election expenses. Council did so even though Kinastowski told them the action was illegal.

Worse, some councillors pushed an idea that they wanted a kind of legal defence fund, tax-funded, to insulate them from legal action. In addition, a motion circulated to expand the idea and allow city councillors to sue the media and their enemies, perceived and real.

The Toronto Party, an unofficial political group, filed suit. Councillor Doug Holyday, using his own money, retained **George Rust-D'Eye**, the municipal law expert, for a second legal challenge. And the divisional court ruled against the city last month.

Meanwhile, council asked the city manager to report

on how to set up an office of independent legal counsel - a kind of in-house lawyer for city councillors. The report recommends against it - another setback. There are "very few legal matters involving city council and individual members that are not currently covered," the report states. If they are not covered, there is a good reason so there's no need to change.

Of course, they knew that already. But using your tax dollars as Canadian Tire money, they keep seeking someone, anyone, who will give an opposing view to back what they want to do.

Holyday is out tens of thousands of dollars. Should he sock it to the city to cover his expenses? If he does, the taxpayer again pays from the right pocket to stop councillors picking the left pocket. And you wonder why they are angry and cynical.

Holyday says he will ask city council to have Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti repay the \$74,402 council illegally paid on his behalf. That would signal an unequivocal defeat and penance.

"The sense of entitlement around here is so appalling," says Holyday, adding that council makes and breaks rules to benefit their colleagues. "I felt we could stop this and should stop this. The solicitor pointedly said no and they ignored her. They were so dead wrong."

What's telling is city councillors failed to see how this might anger voters.

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