

Mississauga backs down on memos; Leaks probed

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Illustrations: Black & White Photo: National Post / Mississauga Councillor Katie Mahoney has withdrawn her motion to track down the source of memos leaked to the National Post.;

After a week of intense and embarrassing public backlash, Mississauga council retreated on Wednesday from plans to root out the source of leaked internal memos, which stirred outrage among taxpayers when the National Post revealed their contents.

But even as Councillor Katie Mahoney withdrew her motion -- which called for full electronic searches of councillors' computers, cellphones and fax machines -- the city's integrity commissioner has launched his own probe of the leaks, prompting some councillors to decry what they are calling a misuse of city resources.

"Wasting tax dollars to hunt down a whistleblower is wrong," Councillor Eve Adams asserted, noting integrity commissioner George Rust-D'Eye's hourly rate exceeds \$600, and requesting a report on how much this investigation would cost the city.

The memos that sparked the debate, which were obtained exclusively by the Post, detailed the city's offer to spend upwards of \$10,000 to send all councillors and a group of senior staffers to Mayor Hazel McCallion's February birthday gala, which will double as a fundraiser for Sheridan College. City manager Janice Baker retracted the offer amid public outrage.

The furor intensified when the Mayor's allies -- led by Ms. Mahoney, who drew a parallel to the international WikiLeaks scandal -- called for a thorough IT probe into the leak source. Councillors were criticized for prioritizing this over the arguably more problematic issue of city-funded birthday party tickets. In withdrawing her motion Wednesday, Ms. Mahoney noted, "I think the point's been made."

But other councillors expressed concern about Mr. Rust-D'Eye's continuing probe and its cost to the city; Ms. Adams suggested his "draconian" investigation has exacerbated the initial offence to taxpayers.

The integrity commissioner has sent out a memo to all council members asking whether they leaked the information, and if not, whether they know who did.

"This seems to be going from bad to worse," Councillor Nando Iannicca said, questioning whether the integrity commissioner has the legal authority to make such demands of elected officials.

Councillor Pat Saito, who initially requested Mr. Rust-D'Eye's assistance in the matter, said her intent

was to determine whether the leaks violated the city's code of conduct, but "he chose to go further" by asking councillors to name the leak source.

Mr. Rust-D'Eye disputed that characterization, however, saying he did not interpret Ms. Saito's inquiry as hypothetical in nature.

"I can't determine whether something breached the code of conduct unless I can identify the person who breached it," he said in an interview.

City solicitor Mary Ellen Bench said council cannot interfere in the integrity's commissioner's probe, but could contact him to clarify the investigation's goal.

The debate in council continued for close to an hour on Wednesday, prompting frustrated outbursts from the Mayor, who repeatedly attempted to shut down the discussion.

"Let's get on with the business. Gosh," Ms. McCallion said at one juncture, as Ms. Saito attempted to respond to a question.

Council ultimately voted on a new motion barring the city from purchasing tickets to the Mayor's birthday gala on behalf of any councillor or staff member, and requesting that the city's policies on such ticket purchases be added to the agenda for upcoming budget discussions. That motion passed unanimously.

IN OTHER COUNCIL NEWS ...

Mississauga councillors voted to limit the use of BlackBerrys in council, adopting a compromise motion from Councillor Pat Saito in which she backed off her initial proposal to ban such devices during public meetings. The original proposal did not sit well with some councillors, who said they needed access to mobile devices to keep on top of work. Under the motion passed Wednesday, BlackBerrys and cellphones must be set on silent mode during meetings, and cannot be used for email during public deputations or presentations. A week earlier, councillors received a staff report indicating many major municipalities allowed the use of BlackBerrys in council.

Councillor Sue McFadden brought forward a series of inquiries as part of her ongoing quest to get to the

bottom of financing for the Mayor's annual gala. Of nearly \$6-million raised from the galas between 1997 and 2007, just over \$1.2-million went to charity, documents show. A sample budget from 2005 shows nearly \$300,000 spent on food, beverages and "entertainment." Tens of thousands more dollars were poured into promotion and operating materials, and nearly \$40,000 was used to cover "other expenses." Ms. McFadden is asking for additional details and cost breakdowns. "I intend on carrying this out in order to show the public that this has been a party for Hazel and the well-to-do," she said.

Megan O'Toole, National Post