

Council's man of 'quality' ready to move ahead

Taylor seeks balance between residents' 'quality of life' and following mayor's agenda

Matthew Pearson, Ottawa Citizen

The rookie chair of city council's community-services committee says his top priority is connecting what councillors do around the committee table directly to the lives of Ottawa residents.

"I want to make sure the things that make it onto our agenda are really substantive things that are going to have an impact on folks," says Mark Taylor, the new councillor for Bay Ward.

Taylor, previously an executive assistant to Mayor **Jim Watson** when Watson was an MPP, is the only new councillor elected to chair one of council's standing committees.

The committee itself is charting a new course this term. With the public-health portfolio having moved to the new Ottawa Board of Health, and the city's big public-housing corporation now with the planning committee, what's left for the community-services committee is "quality of life" stuff: from the fire and paramedic services to parks and recreation to arts and culture.

"Aside from OC Transpo, most of the stuff that's in our committee basket is the stuff that folks see and feel," Taylor says.

Yet, Watson has portrayed himself, so far, as a penny-pincher.

"By no means are the two mutually exclusive," he says. "If we can find areas where we're saving money, then we can repurpose those monies elsewhere to someplace that needs more attention and that residents will feel more," Taylor says.

One of the bigger issues the committee will wrestle with this year is deciding how to spend the money the city government will save as a result of the province taking back some costs downloaded onto municipalities by previous provincial governments.

"It will be millions of dollars that the cities don't have to pay," Taylor says.

"Every year they'll upload more and we'll save more, so we have to decide what we do with that savings."

Taylor adds the committee's role in setting a framework for figuring out what to do with the funds will be part of a larger discussion involving council as a whole, but part of the direction has already been set: During the campaign, the mayor signalled his intention to spend an additional \$14 million a year on homelessness and social housing.

Taylor says he plans to meet with the chiefs of the fire and paramedic services, which fall under his committee's supervision (police are handled by their own oversight board). He expects the discussions will focus on the need for new ambulances and fire trucks, plus infrastructure improvements, to keep response times as quick as possible.

Also on the horizon is a staff report on a proposed living-wage policy for the city.

Backed by anti-poverty activists, the new policy -- if passed -- would ensure that the city pays its employees and contractors more than the provincial minimum wage. The discussion could be contentious, he warns. "It's the kind of thing that brings out the public to committee hearings, for and against."

Taylor admitted he has his work cut out for him as committee chair, but says the presence of longtime committee members such as Shad Qadri and his close working relationship with the mayor should come in handy.

"I know (the mayor's) door is always open," he says. "It's very easy for me to pick up the phone and have a very candid conversation with him about what his thoughts are on some of these things."

The community and protective services committee meets next on Jan. 20.

ILLUS: Colour Photo: David Kawai, Ottawa Citizen / Bay Ward councillor Mark Taylor, previously an executive assistant to Mayor Jim Watson when Watson was an MPP, is the only new councillor elected to chair one of council's standing committees, the community-services committee.;