

Jakobek

Saturday, 13 July 1996

by Cameron Smith

In a farsighted move in 1992 that took it to the lead among world cities, Toronto created an endowment for the well being of future generations. It established the Toronto Atmospheric Fund to counteract the greenhouse warming trend and, from the \$71-million it received on selling the Langstaff Jail Farm, it handed the fund \$23-million to do its job.

From the interest on that money, the fund finances projects primarily to reduce Toronto's dependence on burning fossil fuels, which is the main culprit in producing carbon dioxide (CO₂), the major greenhouse gas.

Some of the projects are big, such as a \$15.3-million loan to the city to switch from high to low-energy lighting for streets and lanes (which means lower electricity demands on power stations burning fossil fuels).

And some of the projects are small, such as providing free trees for people to plant in their back yards in order to cool their houses and reduce the need for air conditioning. Or doing free home audits to identify how homeowners can save energy and improve indoor air quality. These are small beginnings, but they represent an important start, especially since lead times are long for significant change.

However, hovering like a surly cloud in the path of the fund is Toronto city councillor and budget chief Tom Jakobek. Almost from the beginning, Jakobek has been muttering darkly about the extravagance of having such a fund. It was established when "city council was spending money like a bunch of drunken sailors," he said two years ago.

Now he's using the politics of fear. The city's "broke," he said in an interview. "We're in deep trouble … It's not a question of how important it (the fund) is, but whether we can afford it." At this point, of course, it doesn't cost the city anything to afford the fund. It's an endowment. The money was set aside four years ago. What Jakobek wants is to get his hands on that money for his own political purposes. He conjures up the image of people dying because the city lacks money that's being held by the fund. Toronto is so short of cash, he says, that fire trucks have to carry fibrillators because there isn't the money to make sure ambulances can get to fire scenes on time to attend people having heart attacks.

In his nasty scenario, it's a simple choice: claw back money from the fund or risk killing people because "basic 911 services" can't be maintained.

During the winter budget setting process, Jakobek proposed that the city cancel repayment of the loan for converting street and lane lighting. There was about \$11.8-million owing, roughly half of the fund's assets. City council voted no.

Undeterred, Jakobek waited until the very end of the budgeting process and raised the issue again. His timing was impeccable, his strategy adroit. The budget needed a million dollars more to be cut and, with almost all the cutting done, a refusal would mean council would have to go back to other items -- AIDS funding, for instance, or the city's food assistance program -- and squeeze still more cuts from programs that his opponents supported.

This time he won. Fearful of the political fallout, the board of the atmospheric fund -- three city councillors, three civil servants, and four citizens -- agreed to waive 1996 interest payments on the loan. It amounted to \$969,022. Since the total interest revenue of the fund would have come to about \$1.3-million, the fund will have only about \$350,000 to finance programs in the coming year.

What this means to board president, and city councillor Dan Leckie, is that "if we don't find a way to replace that revenue, it will severely curtail our ability to keep the community involved in environmental issues.

"It will be all the small programs that will be hurt … We don't expect a huge CO₂ reduction right away because of our programs. But what we are building is a public commitment to that political goal and down the line that means support for really big stuff. By involving a lot of people now we're creating momentum."

It's a momentum to benefit today's children. But Doctor Death, Tom Jakobek, doesn't see it that way. Of course, he has trouble seeing beyond his bony finger.