



Association municipale de Westmount
Westmount Municipal Association

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2007-8 Board of Directors

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Monday, 21 April 2008

Dear Member,

You are cordially invited to the Annual General Meeting of the Westmount Municipal Association, which will take place on Monday, 5 May 2008 at Victoria Hall. In celebration of the association's centenary, this AGM will begin with a wine and cheese reception at 7 pm, followed by a brief business meeting and the presentation of the Derek Walker Volunteer Citizen of the Year Award to this year's recipient.

Our guest speaker will be Dr. Arthur Porter, Director-General and CEO of the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC).

We hope that many of our former Presidents and board members will be able to attend to honour our 100th year. Our Centenary Committee, ably chaired by Paul Billette, is also busy planning for an Anniversary Dinner for the fall.

Enclosed with this letter is your membership renewal form. Please verify that your contact information is correct, especially your email address. You can also renew your membership online, at <http://wma-amw.org>.

Overall we believe Westmount continues to be well managed and that citizens generally are content with the services provided. The property market continues to demonstrate the City's desirability as a place to live. And our city government personnel continue to be remarkably available to citizens. Guest speakers at our open board meetings during the past year included Mayor Karin Marks, who spoke inspiringly on the move towards becoming a Sustainable Community, and Director-General Bruce St. Louis, who is ending his long service to the city this fall. Councillor Tom Thompson and Urban Planning Director Joanne Poirier also spoke to appreciative WMA members.

The WMA maintains a close working relationship with City officials, both elected and staff, and appreciate their dedication. We do, however, differ with them over modernising the way decisions are made, and the use of electronic tools.

For instance, over the past year we have witnessed the culmination of an unusually divisive process — the battle over artificial turf in Westmount Park. Starting in Fall 2006, when the city first proposed to install it in the lower playing fields to meet the demands for more soccer, this conflict has seen the exchange of bitter words in the media, in question period at City Council, and at a public information meeting held on the issue.

How and why did this process become so contentious? I believe that the lack of debate at City Council played a role. If one or more City Councillors had publicly supported and argued for no artificial turf, those citizens sharing that position would be likely to feel that their cause was being championed. Instead, we had a situation where a large group felt that City Council and administration had already made a decision against their interests, and they therefore felt forced to mount a very vocal and often strident campaign.

That the campaign of the Save the Park! group was ultimately successful attests to the triumph of common sense at City Hall, for which we can all be thankful. And we can be hopeful, too, that the debate over buying a new Madvac cleaner at the March 2008 Council meeting is the start of a new era of transparency in Westmount's governance.

However, public debate at City Council is not the only measure of openness. The Association's Board of Directors is pushing for change on three other fronts: availability to the public of Council documents; recording and broadcasting of Council proceedings; and the holding of open meetings by City Council. This last goes most directly to the question of public debate.



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There is a good reason why the provincial government's Cities and Towns Act insists that all sittings of municipal councils be public. Governments, as servants of citizens and taxpayers, must act, and be seen to act, above reproach. Obviously there will be situations where city councils must meet behind closed doors. For example, Ontario was very specific in its 2006 City of Toronto Act, which requires closed meetings to consider access to information requests, and allows closed meetings in eight other situations. Furthermore, it forbids with a few exceptions that votes be taken in closed session. And any closed session must still begin and end in public. A member of the public who believes a meeting of council, a local board, or a committee was improperly closed, may request that the circumstances be reviewed by an independent investigator.

This certainly is a major contrast with the Quebec situation. Local municipal governments believe they couldn't function efficiently without closed meetings. In Westmount, City Council is in the habit of meeting behind closed doors both before and after public general council meetings. Does this practice conform to the Cities and Towns Act? More importantly, does it provide the kind of transparency of governance appropriate to today's concepts of democracy?

What about recording and broadcasting of council meetings, which extends transparency to citizens who cannot physically attend at City Hall, and provides a record of exactly what was said and done? Years ago, local newspapers provided exhaustive coverage of municipal affairs. Nowadays, in response to commercial pressure, only the most newsworthy issues are reported on. Now that the technology is available, when many citizens are unable to find the time to attend council meetings, it makes sense to provide live video broadcasts of council meetings and to make video feeds available on demand via the World Wide Web. This is the custom in many American cities, including Boston. Locally, the borough of Plateau-Mont Royal makes videos of its council meetings, including question periods, available on the web. Westmount, in contrast, requested that a local newspaper not make audio recordings of Council meetings available on the web, citing privacy concerns.

Finally, there is the issue of council documents being made available to the public. As Don Wedge pointed out in a recent column in the Westmount Independent, these documents have been supplied to the WMA and a copy placed in the public library since early in Peter Trent's mayoralty. They are important because they record some of the issues Council is considering — a kind of early warning system!

When we asked that these documents be posted on the city's website, we were told that many were not available in electronic form. I didn't think that that should be such a big obstacle, so as an experiment I scanned in the half-inch thick stack for one meeting and uploaded them to the WMA website. The process took a couple of hours, not at all unreasonable. I was subsequently asked to not post these documents on the WMA website, until the issue could be addressed by the "General Committee" of the City Council. Unless I missed something, City Council has not formally addressed this, but I did hear, after 7 months, that we were free to put the documents on the WMA website AFTER the council meeting.

The WMA believes that with respect to openness and transparency of governance, Westmount municipal government should be at the leading edge, as it has been in other dossiers like, for example, pesticide use and engine idling. In the coming year, we plan to continue to support the city's efforts in this direction, such as the recent Special Public Forum, held at the start of the Arena/Pool Renewal planning process.

We look forward to seeing you on Monday, 5 May 2008 at Victoria Hall.

Sincerely,

Henry Olders, President