

'It's getting harder with every day'

Councillors facing prospect of a long civic workers' strike

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The likelihood of a summer-long, no-end-in-sight strike by civic workers began to dawn on city hall this week -- including on Toronto's once union-friendly Mayor David Miller and his allies.

As the strike enters its fourth week, councillors who have stayed away from city hall to avoid crossing picket lines are contemplating a return to work as it becomes clear no quick resolution is in sight.

"There does come a point where you really got to question how much longer you can keep things on hold," said budget chief Shelley Carroll (Don Valley East). "If it wears on, this thing is going to become a different animal. People are going to have to conduct their business in a different way."

Ms. Carroll is among a contingent of councillors who have stayed in their wards to avoid inflaming tensions at the bargaining table. Now, she said, she may soon return to city hall, since as head of the budget committee she has a lot of planning work to do in the summer that is piling up on her desk.

Ms. Carroll said the same sentiment may be behind Mr. Miller's new openness to calling a council meeting. The Mayor told councillors this week he is contemplating a meeting "in the next week or two" to deal with business postponed when July's regular council meeting was cancelled.

"If this is going to go on at this slow pace we have business to get on to," said Ms. Carroll. "We've done what we can in terms of respecting your right to strike on every level and to reach a speedy resolution. There isn't going to be a speedy resolution. There are things we have to take care of that are going to be a detriment to our economy. We've got to carry on."

The Mayor himself largely withdrew from public view this week. His office said he had been scheduled to take the week as vacation, but he has stayed in town and turned it into more of a strikecation -- continuing to do some work but also spending more time with his family.

Yesterday, he met the media for the first time since Monday, at a press briefing held not at Metro Hall as usual but at City Hall, another sign of his desire to adapt to the new reality.

Councillors allied with the Mayor have until now generally tried to stay away from city hall. Janet Davis (Beaches East York) attended an employee and labour relations committee meeting, but said she has otherwise been busy in her ward. TTC chair Adam Giambrone (Davenport) also decamped to his constituency office to focus on local matters. He found time to tile a mouldy bathroom on Canada Day, as he announced on Facebook, but has otherwise busied himself with his TTC work.

Other councillors have been showing up at city hall virtually every day of the strike. "All my office staff is in. We were all in," Frank Di Giorgio (York South Weston) said on Thursday. "Today for example there is a lot to do, mostly answering questions for constituents about the strike."



Tim Fraser For National Post

Despite the urging of fed-up Torontonians, the civic workers' strike is entering its fourth week with no end in sight.

Mike Feldman (York Centre) has also been attending arms-length city board and agency meetings that continue apace, such as the Toronto Centre for the Performing Arts. He said he sometimes has to wait 15 minutes to get into the parking garage at city hall. "It's harassment," he said.

Members of the right-leaning Responsible Government Group have been omnipresent at City Hall during the strike, holding press conferences, making demands in petitions, seeking to fill the vacuum left by their departed labour-sympathizing colleagues and seeking to highlight the Mayor's perceived weaknesses during lulls in the news cycle.

Now, as the business of city hall begins to ramp up, many of the Mayor's critics are contemplating taking a breather. Mike Del Grande (Scarborough Agincourt) put off holidays to be at city hall and in his ward to deal with strike issues, but said there's very little point being downtown.

"There's no mail, or very little. There's not much of anything. I'm out in the ward knocking on doors talking to the people, telling them the site to dump," Mr. Del Grande said. "City hall is a joke."

The councillor said he has been feeling increasingly useless and shut "out of the loop" by senior management and the Mayor's inner circle, getting daily briefings that tell them nothing they couldn't read in the newspaper.

"I call them pacifier conference calls, because we're in the dark and they just flush around the same information Joe Public has," Mr. Del Grande said. "If it drags, it drags. Am I going to make a difference? I don't think so. Do you think they need my vote? I don't think so."

Brian Ashton (Scarborough Southwest) said he thinks the Mayor and all councillors are starting to wise up to the prospect of this being a long strike -- and are more ready now than at the beginning of the strike to mete out some tough love until the unions recognize the financial straitjacket Toronto is in.

"I think the city is saying we can live within this financial box that we're currently in and we can protect your job and protect services," said Mr. Ashton, who has regularly been present at city hall.

"But it's getting harder with every day that goes by and you have to recognize that, you have to cut us some slack. Or at some point you're going to see the cutback that nobody wants to see."

ahanes@nationalpost.com