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Former mayor John Sewell speaks next to mayoral candidate George Smitherman at a news conference Thursday, at which he was named head of a government reform panel that Smitherman plans to convene if he's elected Oct. 25.

PAUL MOLONEY/TORONTO STAR

Former Toronto mayor John Sewell has agreed to head a municipal “government reform” panel if George Smitherman is elected mayor on Oct. 25.

An announcement made Thursday morning outside the York Civic Centre named Sewell to head a seven-member panel that would release recommendations by next April.

Also on the list are former Toronto chief planner Paul Bedford; development lawyer Stephen Diamond; former Metro councillor Joan King; Empire Club executive director Julie Dzerowicz; Waqar Khan, co-chair of the Scarborough Civic Action Network; and community health centre director Russ Ford.

With Sewell at his side, Smitherman said the voters have become disconnected from municipal government since the amalgamated city was formed.

“Amalgamation in 1998 made one city from six, but it’s now harder for citizens to connect with their government,” Smitherman said. “And there’s a sense that city hall doesn’t listen too well and that it spends money with little to show for it.”

One area to work on is involving neighbourhood residents more closely in development proposals, he said.

The panel would be unpaid and its recommendations would have to be cost-neutral. But Smitherman said its work could lead to freeing up some money for better urban planning.

Too often, he said, developers focus on bypassing the city’s plans by making their case at the Ontario Municipal Board, which has a reputation of ruling against the city.

“The city of Toronto doesn’t mind spending millions of dollars on lawyers that go and fight hopelessly at the Ontario Municipal Board. Instead of doing that, we can transition those resources to an upfront, community-based planning board.”

Sewell agreed there’s a “serious disconnect” between citizens and city hall. He said he strongly believes a review is long overdue.

“I think it’s a spectacular opportunity,” Sewell said. “I congratulate George on it. If that means I’m endorsing him because of it, so be it; that’s fine with me.”

Don’t expect a stream of other ex-mayors to weigh in on the election. David Crombie, Mel Lastman and Art Eggleton all told the *Star* they have no plans to endorse a candidate.

Smitherman was chief of staff to Barbara Hall when she was mayor. Hall’s office said that as chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, she can’t advocate for any candidate.

Asked if he sees himself as a natural supporter of Joe Pantalone, who’s received Mayor David Miller’s endorsement, Sewell said he’s not “a natural supporter of anyone.”

“I’ve been an independent most of my life. I’m coming here today because I think George is doing exactly what’s called for.”

Sewell added he believes Pantalone has adopted a rosy view of the past seven years under Miller.

“If I can say one thing about Joe Pantalone, he’s representing the position that Toronto’s working well right now. I don’t think a lot of people share that. It’s not an opinion I share.”

Before the news conference even began, rival candidate Rocco Rossi slammed Sewell’s appointment as “municipal patronage of the worst kind.”

Smitherman said support costs for the volunteer panel shouldn’t run much beyond a “pot of coffee.”

“If it was a patronage job, it would be the first one I’d ever gotten in my whole life,” Sewell said. “In fact, I wouldn’t take it if it was a patronage job. This, to me, is public service.”

As Toronto mayor from 1978 to 1980, Sewell was known for a populist style that included wearing jeans and riding his bike to city hall. A lawyer and urban affairs consultant, he remains active on the political scene as a member of the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition and with various causes.

A Smitherman announcement involving a left-wing political figure — albeit one with a strong independent streak — will be seen as another blow to deputy mayor Pantalone, who is running as the standard-bearer of council’s left wing.

On Wednesday, Councillor Joe Mihevc, a veteran colleague and member of the left-wing circle, endorsed Smitherman, citing his belief that he’s the only candidate who can beat Etobicoke Councillor Rob Ford.

The same morning, Miller endorsed Pantalone, saying the other candidates want to “tear down” Toronto.

Pantalone has posted a [web page](#) featuring photos and words from those who have endorsed him, including Miller, activist-musician-journalist Andrew Cash and John Cartwright, president of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council.

Sewell attempted a political comeback in the 2006 election, running against Mihevc in Ward 21 — opposing the streetcar right-of-way on St. Clair Ave. W. that Mihevc supported as TTC vice-chair. Sewell lost by a wide margin.