



Better Idea # 8:

Calgary City Council will be more transparent, more efficient, and easier for citizens to engage

Naheed will be a mayor who will reform how City Council works. He will focus on strategic decision making and improve Council's transparency. Naheed's changes will help Council better serve citizens. That's how this Better Idea will lead to a Better Calgary.

The problem:

The current City Council doesn't value transparency. It is difficult to find out what is going on in council and committee meetings. Calgarians can't even access records of how their elected officials voted on issues. To make matters worse, engaging in (or even viewing) a public hearing means taking an entire day off work and sitting through discussions unrelated to the issue you care about.

Council spends too much time working on mundane issues – they are much more likely to be discussing someone's driveway than they are major financial decisions. Very little of this is required by statute – it's just evolved that way over time. The waste of time and resources is staggering: imagine the hours that Council spent arguing over a two-lane road closure on one Sunday in August versus the fact that they seemingly missed a \$700 million cost overrun on their contracts.

What Naheed brings to this idea:

Naheed has been studying City Council for a long time, as a citizen advocate and columnist for the *Calgary Herald* and *CBC Radio One*. He is also an expert on nonprofit management and governance in his role at Mount Royal University's Bissett School of Business. He's been to more City Council meetings than he cares to remember and has presented at many public hearings.



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What Naheed will do:

Naheed is committed to increasing the transparency and effectiveness of City Council and improving opportunities for citizen engagement.

1. Increase the transparency of City Council

- a. **Release meeting agendas earlier.** Agendas are currently posted only two business days before meetings. This leaves the public scrambling to attend meetings they are interested in. We can enable the City Clerk's office to release agendas five business days prior to meetings.
- b. **Make better minutes and voting records available.** Calgarians have a right to know how their aldermen and mayor have voted on issues that have come before Council. We need to ensure that voting records are transparent and accessible to the public. This could take the form of true Hansard-style minutes, or simply minutes that include links to the video clips of the meeting, as is done in a number of other cities that webcast their Council meetings. Minutes should clearly indicate budget implications of all decisions. As well, the City Clerk should maintain a website with tables of major decisions and how each member of Council voted on them.
- c. **Create much stronger mechanisms for financial disclosure, including reviving the real estate registry.** There are insufficient checks to ensure that Council members are acting in the best interest of Calgarians. This lack of transparency diminishes public trust in our elected officials. We should revive the real estate registry that Council abolished in 2000 and ensure that City Council members declare their conflicts of interest. A good starting point might be the rules for federal Members of Parliament, who must disclose certain financial holdings of themselves, their spouses, and dependent children, as well as abide by certain rules around the acceptance of gifts and travel.
- d. **Make it clear who's meeting with Council.** We don't need an expensive, difficult to administer lobbyist registry. The creation of rules around the registry would itself bog Council down. Is a Community President a "lobbyist"? What about a volunteer with the Cancer Society talking about pesticide use? Rather, each month, Naheed will simply publish a list of everyone he met with that month.
- e. **Track issues by topic.** It is simple to implement an indexing system which allows citizens to follow the decisions regarding a particular issue. For example, a person should be able to search Airport Tunnel and review each decision made by City Council on the topic.



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2. Focus Council on the right things

- a. **Delegate.** City Council should not be debating whether or not a landowner can maintain the existing driveway on a residential piece of property, nor should City Council be approving each secondary suite application. While the Municipal Government Act requires Council to hold a Public Hearing on each Land Use Change, it does not need to delve into minutiae nearly as much as it does. Clarifying bylaws and the role of Council committees will help streamline Council meetings.
- b. **Make sure that Council gets the right information in order to make decisions.** At its final meeting, this City Council passed a ludicrous change to secondary suite regulations – suites are now allowed about one in five lots in the City, including very narrow lots, but not on wider ones. A number of Council members interviewed later did not realize that they had done this. While we can, and should, fault Council members for not asking the right questions, it's also true that the four reports provided by management on this issue never said what neighbourhoods or how many homes would be impacted by the change. Administration needs to work harder to provide Council with the right information, and Council needs to hold Administration accountable for doing so.
- c. **Consider creating an ombudsman to assist citizens with complaints or requests to City Hall.** This would free up more Aldermanic time to focus on strategic issues.
- d. **Train the members of Council on their role.** Without exception, every member of Council is a good person who wants what's best for the City. However, very few of them have experience or training to serve in a governance capacity. Some are not familiar with how to read financial statements, and few understand how to ask the right questions. A few weeks after being elected, they are asked to pass a multi-million dollar budget. We need to invest in early training and development to help Council members be more effective governors.

3. Make it easier for citizens to engage with City Council

- a. **Turn the Council agendas upside-down.** Today, public hearings occur at the beginning of Council meetings. People have to take the entire day off work and wait around for their item. As a result, the vast majority of "public" input that Council gets is from people with a direct financial stake in whatever is being debated. Developers and others are paid to be there. A very simple change is to have Council do its business first, and start the Public Hearing portion at 5 pm. If Council finishes their business early, they get a break, and if it runs long, they pause for the public hearing, showing respect for the members of the public that are there.
- b. **Use technology to make participating easier.** Because citizens don't always know when their agenda item will come up, the current system for participating in Council meetings requires them to be present all day. We can use technologies like texting or email alerts to notify people when agenda items come up, and investigate allowing people to make their presentations by phone or webcam.
- c. **Increase accessibility of City Council webcasts.** While webcasts are currently available for all Council and committee meetings, these can only be viewed live. We can create a webcast archive which would allow citizens to follow meetings at a time convenient for them.



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4. Review how the Mayor and Council members are compensated.

- a. **Institute a pay and perks task force.** Aldermen used to be very badly paid, and as such, were given a number of perks to make the job more palatable. This has changed – an alderman's base salary is now almost \$97,000 per year and the mayor earns about \$190,000. Aldermen also get a car allowance of almost \$10,000 per year and an expense account of \$14,000 (the mayor's numbers are bigger). It's this expense account that famously paid for dry-cleaning expenses of most aldermen and washing and detailing of Mayor Bronconnier's car each week. We need to re-examine these perks.
- b. **Post all Council members' expenses quarterly.** Right now, expenses are posted, but only in general categories. To find out what Council members were actually spending money on, the Calgary Herald had to file a freedom-of-information request. We need to follow the lead of cities like Toronto and post every single expense on the web.