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Durham at a Crossroads: Safety, Surveillance, and the Silencing of Community Voices

Across Durham Region many residents are asking a difficult question: What kind of community are we becoming?

This concern is not coming from one political viewpoint or one neighbourhood. It is being raised by ordinary residents who feel something has changed in the way our communities function — in how public safety is handled, how civic voices are treated, and how institutions respond when people ask questions.

In recent months, disturbing incidents have shaken public confidence.

Residents have seen reports of extreme animal cruelty, including cases where cats heads have been found severed and firearms being discharged killing a dog. These are not simply isolated events — they are warning signs of deeper social problems that should alarm any community. At the same time, serious criminal cases continue to weigh heavily on the public conscience. In Oshawa last week, residents recently learned that a convicted murderer responsible for the horrific death of a 14-year-old boy was granted an unescorted 72-hour pass. Whether such decisions are justified or not, they raise understandable concerns among families who expect public safety to be the first priority.

But the unease residents feel today goes beyond crime.

Many believe our civic culture itself is shifting — from openness toward control.

Across the region, people are noticing the increasing presence of surveillance technology in everyday life. Cameras appear in more public places. Monitoring systems expand. Even drones are now being used above communities, often with little public discussion about when they are deployed, how data is collected, or what safeguards protect residents' privacy.

Technology can serve public safety. But without truthful transparency, it can also erode public trust.

At the same time, many residents feel their ability to participate freely in civic life is shrinking.

Questions have been raised about restrictions on public participation at municipal meetings — including you have to have your topic approved by two-thirds council in order to speak on a topic not on the agenda. There's now recording bans, and procedural barriers that have been put in place leaving some citizens feeling they must seek permission simply to ask questions of their own government.

Democracy functions best when the public feels welcome to participate, not when participation feels controlled.

Outside formal institutions, the tone of public discourse has also deteriorated.

Local online spaces that should connect neighbours sometimes become the opposite. Residents frequently point to Facebook groups such as Pickering Talk are examples of environments where discussion can become toxic — where some voices are censored while harassment, extremist imagery, or hateful symbols such as swastikas or Ku Klux Klan references are allowed to circulate.

Community forums should bring people together. When they instead amplify hostility or intimidation, they weaken the social fabric of the community.

Another controversial issue has been the introduction of reporting mechanisms such as the new Community-Based Hate Reporting Program. Whom its critics have since nicknamed the "snitch line," arguing that such systems risk encouraging neighbours to report one another over ambiguous comments, offensive jokes, and/or minor disagreements. Yes, I said offensive jokes. It's all there in black and white for everyone to see.

The intention may be to prevent harm. But when people begin to feel that everyday conversation could be monitored or reported, it can create a climate of suspicion rather than understanding. History has shown us that societies built on neighbour-reporting and surveillance rarely become freer - they become quieter, more fearful, and less trusting of one another.

Meanwhile, everyday pressures continue to build for families across the region.

Property taxes continue to rise. Infrastructure challenges such as road maintenance and potholes remain persistent frustrations. Development decisions along with deferrals sometimes move forward even when communities try to oppose them, feeling like they have not been fully heard.

At the same time, homelessness, addiction, and mental-health crises are becoming more visible in our public spaces — challenges that require serious policy attention, compassion, and long-term solutions.

Taken individually, each of these issues might seem manageable.

But together they create a deeper question about the direction of civic life in Durham.

Are we building communities based on trust and open dialogue?

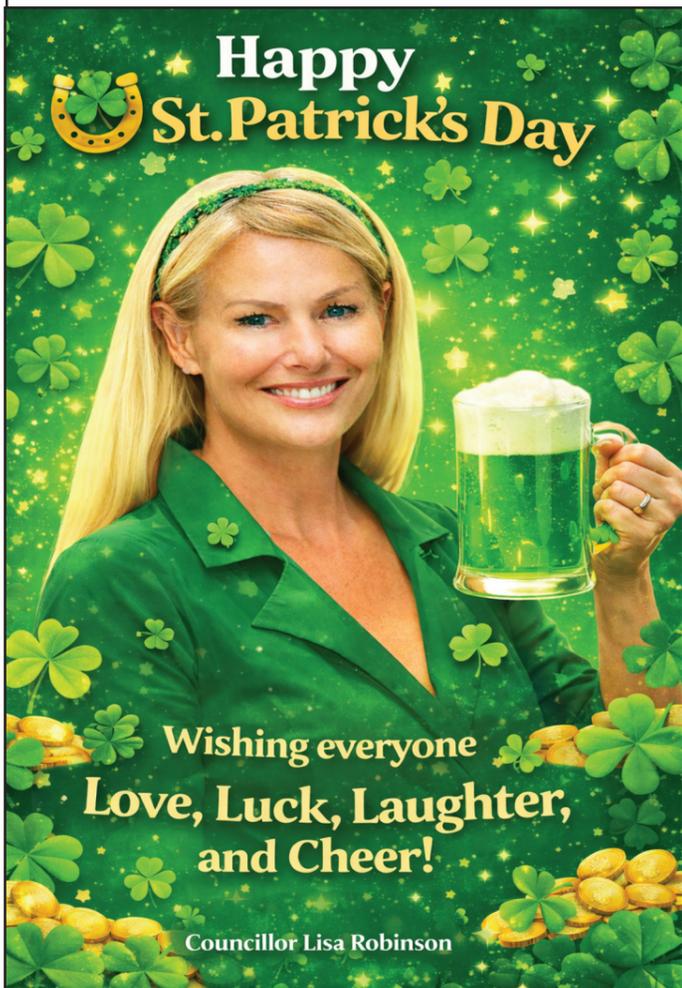
Or are we slowly drifting toward a system where citizens feel monitored, managed, and discouraged from speaking openly?

Durham Region has always been defined by hardworking families, strong neighbourhoods, and citizens who care deeply about their communities. That spirit must never be replaced by silence.

Because democracy does not weaken when people ask questions. It weakens when they stop asking them.

And the future of our communities must never be built on fear, surveillance, or intimidation. It must be built on something far stronger:

Truth, transparency, and the courage of citizens who refuse to be silent about the direction of the place they call home.



THE Mr. Files

By John Mutton

CENTRAL EXCLUSIVE

Karmageddon

By Mr. 'X' ~ John Mutton
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When Procedure Replaces Dialogue at Council

Municipal democracy is not just about votes. It is also about conversation.

For more than a century, local councils across Canada have relied on a simple democratic tradition: citizens come forward, present their concerns through a delegation, and elected officials ask questions to better understand the issue. It is a process rooted in parliamentary practice and reflected in frameworks like Robert's Rules of Order. The purpose is straightforward — allow elected representatives to hear directly from the people and clarify what is being presented before decisions are made.

Recently, however, an email circulated by Clarington's Chief Administrative Officer has sparked a conversation about how that dialogue actually works.

The email attempts to clarify the role of municipal staff during delegations. According to the message, delegations are presented to Council, and Council members may ask questions of the delegate or staff.

Delegates themselves, however, are not permitted to ask questions directly of staff. If a delegate raises a question and a councillor wishes to know the answer, that councillor must ask staff on the delegate's behalf. Furthermore, staff will not compile questions from delegations or prepare responses unless 208.Council formally directs them to do so through a motion.

On paper, this interpretation aligns with a basic principle of municipal governance: staff receive direction from Council as a body. In Ontario, that relationship is grounded in the Municipal Act, 2001, which establishes that municipal administration implements the decisions and directions of elected council.

But the question raised by many observers is not whether the statement is technically correct. The question is whether the interpretation risks changing the nature of public participation at council meetings.

Traditionally, delegations have functioned as a two-way exchange. Citizens present concerns, councillors ask questions, and through that dialogue council gains a clearer understanding of the issue at hand. While delegates have never formally directed staff or controlled the meeting, they have historically been able to raise questions and signal what information they believe council should seek.

In practice, a delegation might say something like this: "We would appreciate if council could obtain the following information from staff." A councillor then decides whether to pursue that information. This system preserves council's authority while still allowing the public to highlight gaps in information.

The email from the CAO reinforces a much stricter interpretation of procedure — one where staff respond only to formal council direction and do not engage with questions raised through delegations unless a councillor explicitly asks.

The difference may appear subtle, but its impact can be significant.

Municipal councils are one of the few democratic forums where residents can speak directly to decision-makers. Unlike provincial or federal legislatures, local councils routinely allow members of the public to appear before them and discuss issues affecting their community. That accessibility is one of the defining features of local government.

When that interaction becomes overly proceduralized, the risk is that delegations begin to feel less like dialogue and more like monologue.

This is not about blaming municipal staff. Administrators operate within structures designed to ensure accountability and proper governance. Staff are not elected and must be careful about when and how they provide direction or information in a public forum. The principle that staff take direction from Council — and not from individual members of the public — is a sound one. But procedure is meant to facilitate democracy, not replace it. The spirit behind parliamentary traditions, including those found in Robert's Rules, is to enable informed decision-making through orderly discussion. The goal is clarity and participation, not rigidity.

That is why questioning delegations has been such an important part of municipal practice. Councillors ask questions not to challenge citizens unnecessarily, but to understand the issues facing their constituents. Often those questions help reveal information that might otherwise be missed. At its best, a delegation is a conversation between the electorate and the people they elected.

The email from Clarington's administration may simply be an attempt to clarify procedure. Yet it also raises a broader governance question worth considering: how much structure is too much when it comes to public participation?

Democratic institutions depend on more than rules. They depend on trust, openness, and a willingness to listen.

Council meetings should never become theatrical exercises where citizens deliver speeches while answers remain locked behind procedural barriers.

The public deserves a forum where concerns can be heard, questions can be explored, and elected officials can fully understand the issues before them.

After all, the purpose of local government is not merely to follow procedure. It is to serve the people who show up to speak.