

Voice of experience: Bill Thake longest serving mayor

Posted Oct 7, 2010
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EMC News - Although he first entered municipal politics in the days of the manual typewriter, Westport Mayor Bill Thake continues to serve his community in the age of the BlackBerry.

After a Toronto newspaper published an article a couple of years ago asserting that Mississauga's own Hazel McCallion was Canada's longest-serving mayor, it soon came to light that this wasn't quite accurate. The venerable Hazel, 89, assumed office in 1978.

Mayor Thake has been presiding over council meetings in the village of Westport since 1969.

Although the village of 700 inhabitants may have escaped the notice of the Toronto media, it is also a lot older than the municipality of Mississauga, having been incorporated in 1904. The town hall, previously used by the Township of North Crosby, dates back to the 1840s, and still has a couple of barred interior windows to serve as reminders of the days when it also served as the local jail.

Thake says he never gave any thought to the possibility that he might be Canada's longest serving mayor until the 2008 Toronto Sun article awarded that honour to McCallion. "Hazel was an alderman when I was a reeve," said Thake, who at 74 is considerably younger than his colleague.

"She's a fine, fine lady," he added. "I think Mississauga is the only municipality that's debt-free."

Politics, said Thake, is in his blood. "My dad and brother were both Reeves," he recalled. Dad served from 1925 to 1928, and brother Orval from 1953 to 1955.

Bill Thake was first elected as a village councillor in 1961. "My brother was reeve at the time," he said. "I had some people approach me at the time and ask me if I'd consider running."

Thake became reeve by acclamation when his predecessor retired. In 50 years of municipal politics he has faced opponents just four times, and is back in 2010 by acclamation.

"It's like a lot of things," he said. "It gets in your blood. You meet a lot of nice people."

As reeve, and later mayor, of Westport Thake has also had his share of battles to fight on behalf of the village. He compares the situation to a student having to stand up to school bullies: "If you're smaller than the rest, you've got to fight all the time."

One important battle won Westport the right to remain a separate village with its own council when other municipalities in the province underwent amalgamation in 1998.

This year Thake is warden of the United Counties of Leeds-Grenville, a one-year appointment he previously held in 1974, 1992 and 2001. At the United Counties level, one consequence of amalgamation is that 10 council members are doing more work - resulting from the downloading of provincial services - than used to be done by over 40 members.

Thake said the 20-odd meetings a month he must attend as county warden, in addition to his duties in Westport, add up to about a 24-hour a week job. He said a municipal politician must spend four to five times the amount of time preparing for a meeting than the time the meeting actually lasts.

"If you're not knowledgeable at a meeting now they can pick you apart and spit you out pretty quick," he said. "The public is very knowledgeable today."

In addition to serving as mayor and warden, Thake has been a member of the board of directors of the Association of Counties and Regions of Ontario (ACRO), and through that association served on a provincial/municipal liaison committee which met with the premier and members of the provincial cabinet. It was through his membership in ACRO that Thake had the opportunity to meet Mississauga Mayor McCallion. He also enjoyed a three-year appointment to the St. Lawrence Parks Commission, and chaired the Ontario Trillium Foundation board for the Hastings, Kingston, Frontenac, Leeds-Grenville and Lanark region. As warden of the United Counties, he is a member of the Eastern Ontario Warden's Caucus.

In his decades of municipal service, Thake has seen both new technology and increasingly complex issues coming before council. In the early 1960s, he recalled, "We had no computers. We didn't even have electric typewriters in the town then."

There were no faxes."

The costs of providing basic services has gone up considerably since 1961. "We spend more in a month than our yearly budget was," said Thake.

SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES

Some significant highlights for Westport in the past 50 years include the provision of municipal water and sewer services, completed in 1973. The community has also acquired a second arena, and a new library and fire hall. "Each year we have expanded our harbour, and it is now an important economic contributor to the village," added Thake.

In 2009, the 40th anniversary of Thake becoming mayor, major renovations and an expansion to the town hall were completed. The building was made handicapped accessible, with all services for the public located on the ground floor. There is now plenty of room to seat delegations wishing to appear before council.

Thake and his wife Marlene have been married 52 years, of which he says, "politics hasn't hurt us." The couple lost a son to a tragic car accident in 1979, but daughter Cindy continues to run the family heating and air conditioning business. The Thakes also have two grandsons, both of whom have graduated from university and found employment.

Of his political future, Thake said "I'll wait and see how I am at the end of this term."

Thake said he still enjoys the work. "You get out of it what you put into," he added. "You don't sit back and rest on your laurels, that's for sure, or you don't last long."