

Park board's independence in city's crosshairs

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The Vancouver Police Board hires the city's police chief while the Vancouver Public Library board chooses its own director. But when it comes to hiring a new general manager for the park board, the city insists that while it will consider all suggestions, the final word on the new boss ends with the city manager.

This was made painfully obvious last year when longtime manager Susan Mundick announced her retirement and told various members of the media, including me, that she planned to stick around until after the 2010 Olympic Games to help choose her successor. That was when the proverbial poop hit the fan.

City manager Penny Ballem, who was hired by Vision Vancouver one month after the party gained power in 2008, wasted no time setting Mundick straight. In an email to Mundick, Ballem wrote, "The general manager of parks and recreation has a line of accountability to me..." and continued, "I will work with [then park board chair] Raj [Hundal] and the other commissioners to support this work in relation to choosing your successor." Ballem backed up her stand with comments from the city's legal department, which said while the park board has exclusive jurisdiction within its area of responsibility as set out in the Vancouver Charter, there are certain areas of an "administrative nature," such as employment matters, where "ultimate authority rests with city council."

Ballem stripped Mundick of her routine duties, forcing her to "retire" months before she planned to. At the time, NPA park board commissioner Ian Robertson and NPA city councillor Suzanne Anton sent out a joint press release in protest. Robertson went so far as to call Ballem's words "despicable."

So I wasn't surprised when I read last week that Robertson wants to challenge that authority and give sole hiring power to the park board.

I agree.

What is the point of having an independent park board, the only elected park board in Canada, if it can't hire its own boss? And why can't the board choose its own boss? Vision Vancouver park board chair Aaron Jasper says this is the way the hiring has been done for decades and that it in no way takes away from the power of the park board.

Jasper says the park board's general manager is just part of a larger management team based out of the city. The city also says it's mandated by the Vancouver Charter, but Robertson says that could easily be changed.

I've been covering the park board for about 11 years, almost the same length of time Mundick held her position. Until now, I've never witnessed a changing of the guard. But I've heard from people who've been around that though the city can legally choose the park board's general manager, it had stayed out of the decision.

This is also the first time in the board's 120-year history the city has insisted on approving the budget of each phase of planning for several large projects, such as the Trout Lake Community Centre renewal.

Anton, a former commissioner, told me she believes Vision Vancouver is slowly stripping the park board of its powers and that Vision commissioners are toeing the party line. In all my years covering the park board, I've never witnessed a power grab such as the one now taking place at city hall.

Robertson put forward a motion at Monday night's meeting asking his fellow commissioners to support his efforts in getting the hiring power officially transferred to the board. But without the support of the majority Vision commissioners, he failed. Robertson was left off the committee selected Monday night by Jasper to short-list candidates for the city's final approval.

It's common knowledge a seat on the park board is considered a rung on the ladder to city hall. I've a feeling there are several commissioners with their eye on that prize. I hope they're not willing to throw the park board's independence away on their climb to the top.

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