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Toronto Zoo a real Animal House

New board member vows a shake-up

By BRYN WEESE, SUN MEDIA

A world-class city like Toronto needs a world-class zoo, but two-legged buffoonery and political back-scratching has put the once-star attraction in peril.

Two members of the zoo's board of directors — both of whom sought to steer the zoo's ship in the right direction — resigned last fall frustrated by an "old guard" wedded to the status quo.

Where they have failed, a new member — Scarborough Councillor Paul Ainslie — has vowed to pick up the torch.

Having landed a zoo board seat last fall in council's mid-term shake-up to fill one of the vacancies, can he now save the Toronto Zoo?

Although Ainslie asked to sit on the zoo board, he did so in August before the problems "exploded."

"Last summer, I didn't see a lot of problems with the zoo. There was always the issue with the Foundation in the background, and at that time I thought it was fixable, and I still do," he said. "Then it all kind of exploded in the fall after I decided to get involved.

"I'm not one to run away from challenges, so I kept my name in (for consideration to be appointed to the board). A lot of people thought I was crazy."

Ainslie's first order of business as a new member on the zoo board of directors was to run for chair of the board last week. His bid failed five votes to two, supported only by the board's vice-chairman Joe Torzsok. He was defeated by Councillor Raymond Cho who has been chair of the zoo board on and off for 12 years.

"I got criticized for running for chair of the zoo ... but no one should be on a board or agency forever, especially as the chair," Ainslie said, noting a fellow board member called his first meeting performance "crusty."

"There should be change, because if people are on a board for a long time, sometimes they become complacent or they start to let things slide. A new perspective is needed."

His second order of business was to try to pass a motion limiting the chairmanship to two consecutive terms.

Councillor Michael Thompson, who resigned from the zoo board last fall along with Councillor Mike Del Grande, wishes Ainslie well on his journey to save the zoo and had some advice for the father of three.

“He better take a lot of Tylenol with him. There’s going to be a lot of headaches,” Thompson said, noting he was disappointed Ainslie’s bid for the chair was unsuccessful.

“Because the old guard is still in place, you’re never going to get the needed change to really right the ship of the zoo that’s actually leaning and sinking ... I applaud Paul on his effort, but I think after a while he, too, will resign because of the frustration of trying to implement changes to the zoo.”

But Ainslie said he will not resign, despite what could be a very bumpy road ahead of him. Among other things, he says he’s guided by activist Nellie McClung’s defiant creed, “Never retreat, never explain, never apologize. Get the thing done and let them howl.”

“I’ve got a plaque that says that on my desk,” he laughed. “It could be tough going ahead, but I’m not one to back down from a fight. I’m pretty thick-skinned.”

Principally, Ainslie is critical of the board’s decision to sever ties this past September with the Toronto Zoo Foundation, the largely volunteer fundraising arm of the zoo for the past 34 years.

He said the foundation should have been restructured, instead of discarded, because the zoo board is now planning to raise \$250 million itself in the next decade to fund an ambitious expansion plan.

“I think the fundraising goals are wildly outrageous,” he said, calling the foundation/board break-up “mind boggling.” “I have an inherent difficulty with politicians going out and knocking on doors to raise money.”

Ainslie, who knows how to carry the ones and sits on the city’s budget committee, also thinks some of the capital expansion plans at the zoo should take a back seat to repairing the facilities they already have.

“Our state of good repair (at the zoo) is at \$80 million, and this is the problem I have sometimes at city council with some of (Mayor David Miller’s) initiatives ... Why wouldn’t you fix what you have first?” he said. “We need to be responsible with our dollars.”

But saving the zoo, and repairing its relationship with the Zoo Foundation, can’t be left to one lone voice on the board.

Miller has to get involved, said Thompson.

“The mayor is also complicit in this, because he doesn’t seem to get it or care that there needs to be a cleansing of the board,” Thompson said.

“We know the leadership there is lacking big time, and obviously the mayor doesn’t care ... all that he is concerned about is to ensure that he has (Cho’s) vote that he needs on council,” he charged. “It’s about the mayor’s interest, not the zoo’s interest, and not the city’s interest. It’s about his interest to hold on to power.”

Ainslie, too, told the Sunday Sun when he approached the mayor to tell him he was going to run for the chair of the zoo board, Miller told him he would be supporting Cho.

Miller repeatedly ducked requests from the Sun to clarify what, if anything, the city intends to do about Toronto’s problem-plagued zoo, the controversy swirling around its fundraising foundation and political infighting at the zoo board.

When last asked for an interview concerning the problems at the zoo, Stuart Green, a spokesman for Miller, said in an email, “mayor has faith in the board.”

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