

Ainslie to seek chair of zoo board

Scarborough councillors will square off over position

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When the Toronto Zoo Board meets for the first time in 2009, the members will have more than the usual monkey business to deal with.

Ward 43 (Scarborough East) Councillor Paul Ainslie, one of two city councillors freshly appointed to the board by Toronto Council late last year, will be challenging incumbent chair Raymond Cho (Ward 42, Scarborough-Rouge River) for the job.

Ainslie sent a letter to members of the zoo board announcing his intentions to seek the job, which Cho told The Mirror he hopes to hang on to when the board formally votes on the matter at its meeting Thursday, Jan. 22.

In an interview, Ainslie said he's seeking the chair to change some of the ways the organization has operated over the past year - in particular, to undo what he said is damage caused by the Toronto Zoo's break with its fundraising foundation last year.

Ainslie said he is worried that the board has bitten off more than it can chew taking fundraising back into its own purview, at the same time as it embarks on a \$250-million fundraising campaign.

"They have a capital plan that I don't think is quite realistic - especially with the state of the economy," said Ainslie.

"They're expecting a lot of fundraising with the private sector and I think that doing away with the foundation was a mistake. They should have looked at restructuring it."

Ainslie also questioned plans to build a biogas plant using zoo animal excrement.

"I've read some things in the media - using animal waste for generating electricity and putting solar panels out in the parking lot and wind turbines out in parts of the zoo - which I think are laudable goals but nowhere in the zoo's capital or operating plan do you see those things taking place or even registering," he said.

"There needs to be some leadership brought to bear on our priorities."

Ainslie said he believes he has enough support to win the day.

However, Cho made it clear that he won't be stepping aside.

"If I were Paul Ainslie first I would come to the board meeting, get the inside story and see why the board has come to this decision - and then get some more accurate information," he said. "I haven't read his letter, but the zoo has been very successful in many, many ways."

Board member and Ward 38 (Scarborough Centre) Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker also made it clear he was supporting Cho.

"I'll be choosing Councillor Cho - no disrespect to Councillor Ainslie," he said.

"I've been on the zoo board for five years now, seen how we are evolving, changing and moving forward, and I really like it. Councillor Cho's done a lot of hard work and I don't see any reasons to change leaders at this time."

Board member and Ward 7 (York West) Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti just shook his head and said, "It seems like everybody wants to be a chair," when asked about Ainslie's ambitions.