

Kanata West: A loss of trust

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The City of Ottawa needs a planning department that is sturdily independent and dedicated to a well-designed community as well as the welfare of its taxpayers.

It must remain above the developmental fray, choosing always to do what's right, sometimes in the face of political and pecuniary pressures. After all, the municipality owned land in the affected area.

In yet another good report by the very useful Alain Lalonde, the auditor general showed that the city failed in this quest by putting itself in a conflict of interest in Kanata West.

It did this by joining a consortium of developers concerned with land around Scotiabank Place, then acting as the adjudicator in decisions on the property.

Not only that, but the planning department was sloppy, according to Mr. Lalonde. Studies on the development were just plain wrong and some of those doing that work were in possible conflict of interest.

Were that not enough, it took a city water resources engineer, Ted Cooper, to warn the municipality and the public that the development had serious drawbacks.

Mr. Cooper was removed from the project by former city planning manager Denis Jacobs, putting his career in jeopardy.

Yet there's more. Mr. Lalonde warned that the municipality could be taking on an unknown amount of liability from potentially allowing building on a flood plain.

Homeowners and taxpayers (who would be forced to foot the bill for the results of any legal action by affected residents) should be rightfully shocked that such actions would be considered. We have seen the difficulties the City of Gatineau is in as a result of approving homes on a slope containing unstable Leda clay. Do we need this kind of trouble on this side of the river?

As well, Mr. Lalonde rightly indicates that the city must have its own experts check the work of developers' consultants to ensure it is correct.

"It's not a matter of cost. It's a matter of obligation. It's something the city must do," Mr. Lalonde said. "The studies were not accurate."

The Kanata West issue is a very disappointing moment in Ottawa's history. There is an implicit contract of trust between residents, their elected officials and the city's public servants that the municipality's employees will do the right thing. And most civic employees do the right thing.

But this situation is particularly smelly. City officials were warned by one of their own that something was amiss and he was, at best, ignored. He had to go public to get the right thing done. The contract of trust was broken.

City manager Kent Kirkpatrick must start the long process of getting to the bottom of this mess - discovering the intent and punishing the wrong-doers. Trust is not restored quickly.

And thank goodness for civic employees such as Mr. Cooper and Mr. Lalonde.