

I found the article "City's bid to buy Schools accepted"(The Packet & Times, Aug. 23) to be quite remarkable.

Given that our real estate market has been under some serious duress lately, it is puzzling why the City of Orillia wishes to enter the real estate business on pure speculation. This is premised on comments made from both Mayor Ron Stevens and Coun. Ralph Cipolla. The inference that they will see, or try to ascertain, what uses they can make of these sites leaves one questioning the rationale.

Stevens' other comment, "That's great. We now own them and we have care and control of what happens to them," leaves one to question why buy something if you are not sure you need at all? This would give rise to buying these lands on a condition that there is a need and then proceeding to purchase them after that need is determined.

In the alternative, if the lands end up in private ownership, the private sector would have to conform to the city's official plan and zoning bylaws, which is within the city's control, is it not? The only difference is that if those parcels were in private hands, they would be generating tax revenue for the city rather than a tax drain.

I know that as a land developer you need a sound business plan before you purchase land. Furthermore, if one is to purchase land, you will typically insert certain conditions protecting the buyer, such as zoning, soils, environmental and asbestos etc., especially when purchasing older buildings. I trust that the city has acted prudently on this one.

The bigger question that needs to be asked is; Why is the city gambling with taxpayer's money to speculate on real estate? The purchase price fails to recognize the added expense to demolish the existing buildings, which again ends up costing more taxpayer dollars. Furthermore, should the city fail to find a legitimate use for any one of these properties, then they will need to sell it and run the risk of losing more tax dollars -- hopefully not. Real estate is always a gamble, particularly when undertaken without a sound plan.

So why don't our elected officials be more forthright and put their cards on the table. What do they really want us taxpayers to finance and for how much?

I suspect the real answer is already known by council and that the so-called public process is no more than a charade, just like premeditated decisions such as the MURF (multi-use recreation facility and library. Those decisions cost city of taxpayers in excess of \$20 million -- enough to finance other capital projects or about lower our tax rates.

So please, do the taxpayers of the City of Orillia a big favour: Stop wasting our money when you are unsure of the outcome. Better yet, tell it as it is rather than surprise us once again.

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