November 26, 2012 Presentation (Speech) by Brant Burrow to Elizabethtown-Kitley Council re: Comprehensive Petition/Survey

Your Worship, Councillors, Staff, and Guests …

For those guests who may be attending a Council meeting for the first time, I would like to explain that it is vitally important for you to maintain the utmost decorum at all times. Any outburst could undermine our efforts, as the Presiding Officer may elect to dismiss us from Council Chambers.

[If the mayor has not already explained] Also, normal protocol does not allow for public participation during the main portion of the meeting. Towards the end of the evening, there will be a Public Question Period where you should be given an opportunity to ask up to 2 questions.

I will begin by sharing with you, the definition of an intervention – it is the act of interfering with the outcome or course, especially of a condition or process, so as to prevent harm or improve functioning. This … is an intervention.

We hear, and see written, that the Township is committed to being open, accessible, and accountable – that it wants to ensure a relationship of public trust. But Council's actions speak far louder than its words. Through this intervention, it is hoped that you will once again be able to look at yourselves through the lens of an average resident. This is not intended to be a public lynching; rather, it is intended as an opportunity for enlightenment.

We know that you are regular people, just like the rest of us. We know you are not super-human or infallible, and we don't expect you to be. But we do expect you to do your best to represent the wants and needs of your constituents.

I have watched every Council member, at one time or another, express extreme frustration towards things they cannot control – things like rising policing costs, placement of solar farms, and vanishing provincial funding. Surely, since Council knows first-hand what it feels like to be powerless, it can empathize with a public that feels the same way about some of the issues on Council's own table.

The petition which was circulated has 5 distinct topics. But this petition is not just about each specific topic. You have all seen the compelling results (which have been reproduced, here *[point to easel]*), and when they are examined as a whole, within the context of other well-established facts, they reveal a much larger issue. They clearly illustrate the tunnel vision which develops when a Council consistently and systematically deliberates in isolation. Let's look at some examples.

In the summertime, Council formed a Finance Committee using a Committee of the Whole approach. It subsequently met several times to conduct its business, without ever appearing as a recognized Committee on the Township's website. It never published a meeting date on the website's calendar, nor did it publish any of its agendas on the website ahead of its meetings. At the time, it never published any of its minutes on the website, either – though, now that the Committee has folded, I see its minutes have recently been published, after the fact. To the best of our knowledge, it never underwent its own scrutiny and review process which other committees were subjected to.

Without any residents on the Finance Committee, and therefore, without the benefit of any public perspective, it introduced an initiative to consider striking most of the existing Standing Committees, in favour of a Committee of the Whole system. The initial communication sent to the Committees suggested that restructuring was a $95K topic – quite a sensational number. However, we now see from the Staff report that it's really

less than a $10K topic. And, that report doesn't take into account any cost reductions from committees who have already indicated they would waive their honourariums.

Residents have faith in the public committee system; they understand there is a cost for that system and they feel it has good value. Item #1 of the survey speaks to this – overwhelmingly, residents have voiced that they want the committees to stay. Although item #1 was focused on the Waste Management Committee, many residents indicated – conversationally – that they valued public committees in general.

When notice of the restructuring report was first issued, there was an immediate backlash from committee members – and indeed, from two Councillors. Other members of Council seemed dumbfounded that people were "over reacting" and treating it as a "done deal", even though nothing had been decided yet. Council has only itself to thank for that reaction. As the next item will show, there was every reason to conclude that the restructuring would indeed become a "done deal".

Brush Fees. Brought about by one resident's complaint, Council decided a couple of months ago – in a very expedient manner – to eliminate brush fees at the landfill. As official minutes show, this topic was introduced as new business (in other words, not originally on the agenda) at an afternoon Working Session (a meeting which would be inconvenient for the public to attend). The decision was to be effective immediately.

When I learned of this, I was alarmed. I submitted a formal letter of complaint – raising concerns over the way normal protocols seemed to have been set aside. The official response I received showed a complete lack of moral compass. Not only was it unapologetic, it conveyed a clear sense of entitlement – providing one deflection after another.

In fact, the nature of the entire 3-page response to my complaint can be summed up by quoting the following short excerpt: "Normally, a change to a by-law such as a fee structure requires an amending by-law **but** Council is not bound to follow its by-laws. Council can choose not to enforce its own by-laws …".

Council's handling of the brush fee issue, including its clarification that it can – **and does** – operate above its own by-laws, has cast a dark shadow over its integrity and accountability. Clearly, it's open season – **anything** can quickly become a "done deal". Fool us once, shame on you – fool us twice, shame on us.

If Council is so focused on budgetary concerns, why was an existing revenue stream eliminated? Why have months gone by with no action on cost saving opportunities surrounding recycling contracts? Why does Council continue to pay a 3rd party for investigative services it can get free from the Ontario Ombudsman? I have some supportable closed meeting concerns, but I am reluctant to submit a complaint because of the resulting burden to the tax payers. The fact that the Ontario Municipal Act even allows for a self-appointed investigator is absurd – that would be like the Criminal Code allowing inmates to select their own guards.

If there are no "sacred cows", why was the Finance Committee never scrutinized in the same way as other committees? Why is Council sending representatives to conferences, such as Good Roads, **every year** instead of every two years? Why does Council continue to provide concessions to Bellamy Park – a financial Albatross around the necks of all taxpayers? It seems there may be some "sacred cows" after all.

I see an item on tonight's agenda, regarding a Code of Conduct for Council. Hopefully, this will be a step in the **right** direction, and not just a veiled muzzle policy which can be applied – arbitrarily – to Councillors who speak out with concerns shared by the public.

It would be a shame if we had to come to the defence of the ones who are doing the very thing we expect of them.

I will leave you with one final thought. We have often heard that “all Committees serve at the pleasure of Council”. From the website for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we are told: “... it is a vigilant and knowledgeable public exercising their right to vote in a municipal election that best keeps Councils in check”. In other words, Council serves at the pleasure of the people.