

EDITORIAL

Open and transparent

Defiant Hamilton Waterfront Trust officials essentially told city councillors that despite public concerns and media criticism, any problems with the organization were much ado about nothing.

Sure, the trust owes the city \$396,000 in back taxes, it consistently posts annual deficits, and the Canadian Revenue Agency annulled the trust's charity status last year. But those problems can be easily explained, said the trust's chair.

So for critics to call for a value-for-money audit, or to subject the agency to further scrutiny is, as Bob Charters, former Hamilton alderman, stated is "offensive."

Charters also laid into critics and the media saying during his presentation that, he took exception to the "false accusations (that have) never been proven" about the trust and how it has conducted business. He went to say that asking for further accountability is an insult to board members and volunteers.

This isn't the first time an agency receiving public money starts shouting at the media and critics when demands are made to become more open and transparent. It shouldn't be a hardship, but for some organizations the idea of being held accountable is hard to fathom.

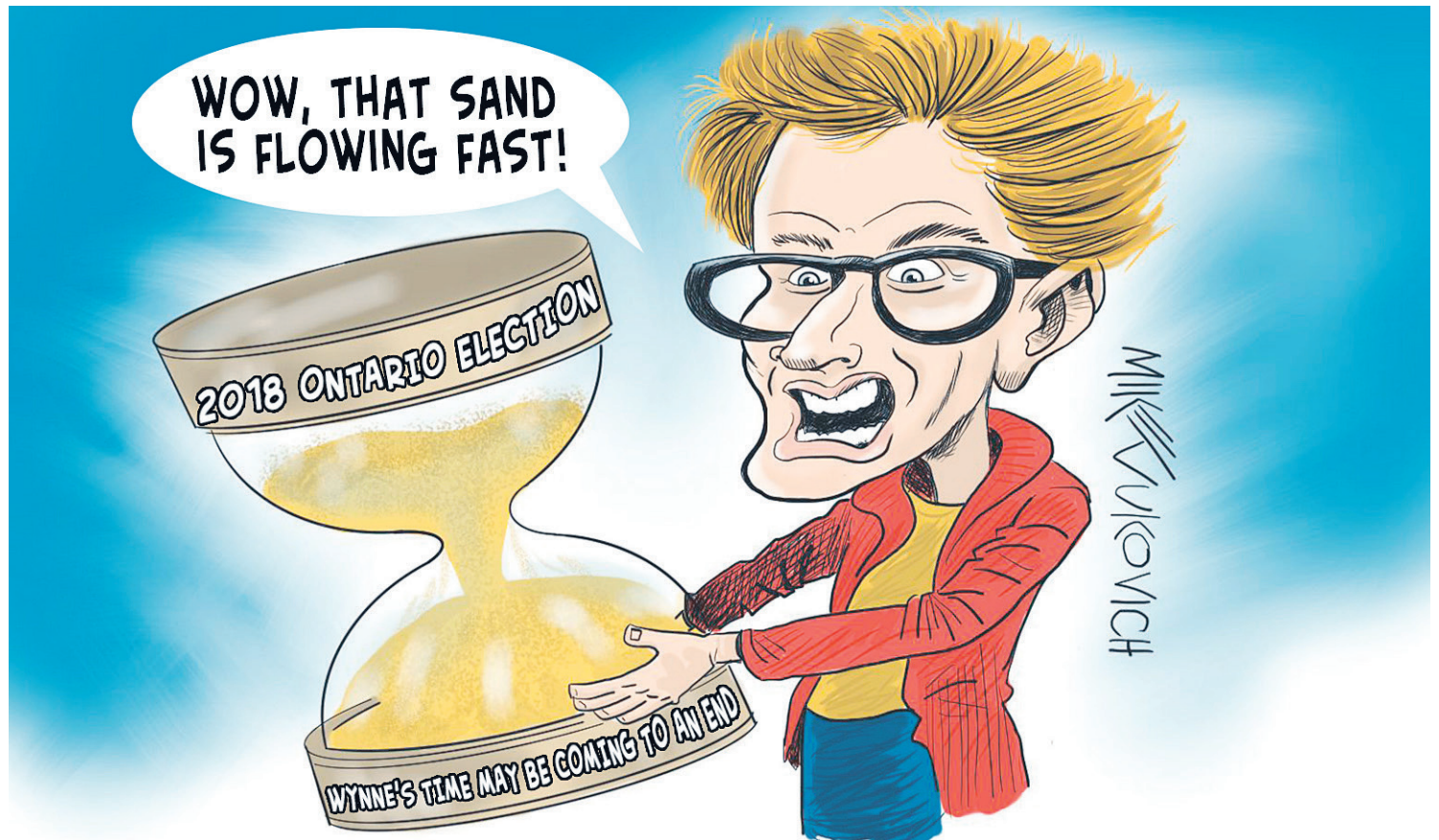
For instance, the Hamilton Police Services delayed, criticized, argued and fought tooth and nail — including against Hamilton Community News — to reveal its full budget to the public. Unsurprisingly, the sky didn't fall when the police finally did it.

Other agencies that receive taxpayer money should be as open as possible on how their operations are managed. In a welcome response, the Library Board recently started live streaming its monthly meetings.

Still, other agencies remain persistently opaque as to how public monies are used and their decisions are made under the archaic notion that they and their volunteers are doing a public good and they should be above criticism.

But as the so-called "misunderstandings" with the Hamilton Waterfront Trust has proven, allowing an organization the leeway to operate in the dark and away from the public eye can create suspicion and mistrust.

Calling for a forensic audit isn't an "insult" nor an "offense" to the board and the people who serve on it. Instead, it is the first of what should have been long ago an attempt to understand, explain and provide a free-flowing highway of information to the city and the public for all to see.



Column

Customer service isn't hard to get right

Gordon Cameron

GROUP MANAGING EDITOR



Last week I was out for dinner with a friend of mine. While the food was great, it was clearly a slow night for the restaurant. For the entire time we were there I don't think there were more than two tables occupied at any one time. Sadly for the wait staff of three, it meant a long, boring shift.

The young woman assigned to our table was quite pleasant and did her job well. However, as the night wore on I got more and more frustrated with her constant, and frankly rude, interruption of the discussion my friend and I were having.

She's not alone in this behaviour. It's hard to remember the last time when I've been dining out and not had the server come up and with out so much as an "excuse me," force him or herself into the middle of our conversation to inquire if we needed anything.

I get that it comes from the idea of want-

ing to provide good customer service, but I'd love someone to tell me how my experience is improved by someone ignoring the most basic tenants of politeness and civility to ask if I want a refill of my pop?

Then there was the problem I had with my flight from Buffalo to Raleigh, North Carolina on my recent vacation. The plane that was supposed to take us on the first leg never arrived (for reasons that were never explained to us), so the airline sent a replacement and rebooked all our connections. When the new plane finally arrived (at about the time I was supposed to be landing in Raleigh) it was discovered that no one at the airline remembered to get any flight attendants, which meant a further round of rebooking and me missing the event that was the whole reason for the trip to North Carolina.

I waited until my vacation was over before writing in to complain. I asked some very specific questions and demanded answers. The webform told me that it would be seven to 10 days before I would receive a reply, so I hit send and started the wait.

When the reply came the customer service agent did apologize as sincerely as one can in

an e-mail and even addressed the fact that I had missed my football game.

So far, so good.

Then it all fell apart. I was told that they couldn't (that is to say, wouldn't) answer any of my questions. Instead, I was treated to a lecture informing me of how flight attendants can't work more than a certain number of hours. I actually did know that, but the question becomes why did no one at the airline know that when they sent the new plane?

Frankly I was so livid after reading the reply (which is an emotion that I don't often experience) that I have yet to write back.

As frustrating as bad customer service is, I understand that people don't get everything right all the time. Much of what I do is provide customer service to our readers. Most times, I think I do pretty well, but I'm sure there have been times when the reader would disagree. While I can't always deliver the resolution the reader wants, I do my best to do my best.

And I think that's what good customer service should be all about.

— Gordon Cameron is Group Managing Editor for Hamilton Community News.

Should all organizations that receive public money be transparent?
Have your say Vote online at www.hamiltonnews.com
 Last week we asked:
 Do you feel safe traveling on the Red Hill and Lincoln Alexander parkways?
49% said Yes and **51%** said No