

Exit of public works director has put chill in city hall, say some Winnipeg councillors

Former members of Bowman's inner circle claim mayor is trying to exert more control over senior managers

By Bartley Kives, [CBC News](#) May 19, 2017

The departure of Winnipeg's public works director has renewed council opponents' claims that Mayor Brian Bowman is trying to tighten his grip over the city's public service.

Lester Deane left the city this week in a personnel move chief administrative officer Doug McNeil refused to define as either a resignation or a dismissal.

On Wednesday, McNeil said Deane failed to meet expectations, said a number of events led to the "difficult decision" and suggested the 14-year city employee lacked political acumen.

- [CAO says former public works director 'didn't meet my expectations'](#)

In the wake of Deane's departure, two former members of the mayor's inner circle said they fear Deane's relationship with the mayor led to the departure — and that will make remaining senior managers reluctant to express their views or offer advice that could run contrary to the mayor's political agenda.

"The relinquishing of the public works director has put a big chill on what the departments will talk to you about. I've seen it in two days," South Winnipeg-St. Norbert Coun. Janice Lukes said in an interview on Thursday.

"I've had a lot of interaction with a lot of departments and there's a big apprehension."

North Kildonan Coun. Jeff Browaty said he still wants to know more about what led to Deane's departure.

"We want to have the best people possible," Browaty said Thursday in an interview. "The CAO mentioned political acumen, but not political acumen above engineering skills and not political acumen above human-resources skills."

In recent months, four potential irritants emerged in the relationship between Bowman and Deane.

Most prominently, the mayor and the former public works director disagreed in November over how long it would take to reopen Portage & Main to pedestrians, one of the mayor's political objectives.

Deane suggested the work would take two years at a time when Bowman said he still hoped the intersection would open in time for the Canada Summer Games this July. Bowman called Deane's statement inaccurate and suggested the public works director was not up to speed on the file.

- [Portage and Main reopening possible, albeit with traffic impacts, city study says](#)
- [Bowman calls city director 'inaccurate' as Portage and Main confusion mounts](#)

More obliquely, Deane's department garnered the mayor's scrutiny in March over its decision to sole-source an active-transportation contract to a firm owned by Jeannette Montufar, a consultant who was under investigation by the city auditor at the time but later cleared.

Also in March, the mayor criticized the city for losing track of a parcel of land it needed to purchase in order to build the Waverley underpass.

- [City pays nearly \\$500K for land it overlooked near Waverley underpass](#)
- [City dismisses conflict-of-interest allegation, professionalism complaint against bike-lane consultant](#)

Then in May, Deane brought his electric car to city hall and showed it off to reporters and councillors on the same day council's public works committee considered a charging-station motion authored by Transcona Coun. Russ Wyatt, Bowman's most vociferous critic on city council.

On Wednesday, when McNeil confirmed Deane's departure, Bowman declined to say whether his relationship with Deane factored into the latter's departure.

On Thursday, Bowman shrugged off the suggestion the personnel move could cast a chill on the city's administration.

"The public service is expected to be accountable to elected officials through council," Bowman said in an interview outside his office. "The public service takes their policy marching orders from council."

Lukes and Browaty claim those marching orders are not coming from council as a whole.

"The CAO takes his orders from the mayor and executive policy committee," said Lukes, who has complained of being denied access to senior city officials and important information since Bowman removed her and Browaty from his inner circle in an executive policy committee meeting last fall.

On Wednesday, city council will debate a Lukes-authored motion to compel city officials to meet with councillors about any report within the four-day period before that document comes before a council committee.

She claims she has been denied access to McNeil and other officials but nonetheless asked to vote on reports.

"I'm denied setting up a meeting, setting up a phone call. How am I going to ask questions to form my decisions?" she asked.

Browaty, meanwhile, has complained the number of council seminars has plummeted from an average of around two per month to none at all.

Since March, the North Kildonan councillor has been demanding access to a city-commissioned traffic study about reopening Portage & Main. After taking the rare step — for a city councillor — of filing a freedom-of-information request for the document, Browaty announced Wednesday he plans to file a formal complaint about the lack of access to the provincial ombudsman.

- [Browaty demands release of Portage and Main study](#)

The mayor, however, said there is no effort to prevent councillors from accessing information and encouraged his council colleagues to form stronger relationships with public servants.

"You don't see me out, though the media, trying to humiliate members of the public service as we have other members of council doing," Bowman said. "That's not something I've ever thought is a good way to motivate people who serve the taxpayers."