

Councillors call for change in wake of work culture investigation

By: Ryan Thorpe Posted: April 17, 2019

City councillors are calling for a "major shake-up" in Winnipeg's civil service, as allegations swirl multiple departments have long been home to a slack, low-expectations work culture.

"If what's going on right now doesn't scream that it's time to look at our governance model, then I don't know what does. Changing a bureaucracy is really difficult, it's hard, but I'm hoping this can be the catalyst for change," said Coun. Janice Lukes (Waverley West).

On Tuesday, she spearheaded a motion to make public the results of the ongoing internal probe into allegations of widespread workplace misconduct in the planning, property and development department.

"I think the timing of this couldn't be better, considering we'll be getting a new (chief administrative officer) in the near future. It's time for a big shake-up," she said Wednesday.

Lukes' motion calling on the release of a "full and detailed report" within 30 days of the city's internal investigation was unanimously approved by the executive policy committee.

Prior to the vote, Lukes addressed the committee (which she is not a member of), saying she's received calls from city workers during the past two weeks who have shared stories of "shocking" nepotism in their respective departments. She said citizens have told her the problems in the PPD department are "over and beyond" the allegations brought to light in a Free Press report April 4.

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A private investigation into city building inspectors — documented in video, photos and notes shared with the Free Press for review — was bankrolled by a group of more than a dozen frustrated taxpayers who had previously had negative experiences with the department.

The private investigators allege of the 17 inspectors placed under surveillance over 28 days, only one seemed to be putting in an honest day's work.

On Tuesday, the Free Press published a follow-up story based on the accounts of two civic employees — one current and one former — who say the allegations are just the tip of the iceberg.

They described a culture in multiple public works departments of short, lackadaisical workdays, peppered with frequent, lengthy coffee breaks and extended lunches, and one where fireable offences — including sleeping, drinking alcohol on the job and theft or misuse of equipment — are rife.

Lukes' desire for a major shake-up in the Winnipeg public service was echoed by Coun. Jeff Browaty (North Kildonan).

"I think you generally expect the public sector to be less efficient than the private sector, but at the end of the day, our employees are well-paid and should be putting in an honest day's work," Browaty said.

"I've heard stories over the years of summer students coming in and being dismayed at what they see as a laid-back work culture."

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Browaty pointed out the City of Winnipeg does operate an anonymous tip line, where members of the public and city employees can report waste and inefficiencies. However, he said, maybe it's time to look at investing extra resources in proactively investigating whether the public service is operating at the level expected.

"I really hope this brings on major changes, not just some improvements around the edges. I'd like to see a much higher-performing city government. I hope that's where this leads," Browaty said.

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The City of Winnipeg has indicated its investigation into the allegations against the PPD inspectors will wrap up in the coming weeks. It remains unclear how much detail will be made public.

Whatever the outcome, Lukes said she feels the city should be looking beyond any one department.

"What we really need is an overhaul of the management process. If this is a culture thing, then you have to have a big shake-up, because everything starts from the top down," she said.

"I really think this is an opportune time for us to take a big-picture look."