

Toronto on strike: City hunkers down for a long one

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By Allison Hanes, National Post

With business at City Hall ground to a halt for 12 days now, the prospect of a long summer of labour strife loomed large yesterday as Toronto officials hunkered down in Metro Hall, the nerve centre of strike operations, and this month's regular council meeting was cancelled.

There were no briefings for the media, no appearances by Mayor David Miller, no updates for the public, no progress in the stalled talks between the city and its striking indoor and outdoor unions.

A city council meeting, scheduled for Monday and Tuesday, was officially scrapped, freeing up city councillors to do other things --like tile their bathrooms.

Councillor Adam Giambrone (Davenport), who's also chairman of the Toronto Transit Commission, declared on Facebook that's what he's doing -- now that the order to purchase 204 new streetcars was placed with Bombardier earlier this week.

Doug Holyday (Etobicoke Centre) drifted around City Hall waiting in vain to learn whether the employee and labour relations committee will be asked to sit any time soon, signalling a possible breakthrough.

Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti (York West), meanwhile, took his staff for a "working brunch" at an all-day breakfast joint at Jane Street and Steeles Avenue.

Regular city business has ground to a halt and all efforts are focused on delivering bare-bones service to residents of Toronto, in particular a place to leave their garbage.

Toronto's Medical Officer of Health paid a visit to Christie Pits Park -- one of 19 designated drop off points -- where enraged local residents have been trying to have a temporary dump shut down as a hazard.

Dr. David McKeown inspected the site, then later held a news conference declaring it all clear. He called for understanding among angry neighbours who have been picketing fellow residents bringing their garbage and preventing the spraying of chemicals on the bags piled up in a melted ice rink that would keep away vermin.

"I am issuing an appeal to residents who are concerned about the garbage to co-operate with city officials and to ensure access to these sites by the pest control operator," Dr. McKeown said in a statement. "While I

appreciate there are concerns about the use of pesticides, I am satisfied that the city is taking the necessary precautions to ensure pesticides are applied in a way that minimizes any risk to public health."

A striker was arrested by Toronto police for kicking a car, but otherwise Nathan Phillips Square was mostly monopolized by the Jazz Festival.

Fresh local strawberries were back for sale in Dundas Square, and farmers' markets will resume at six city locations next week. A few overstuffed bins of rotting garbage were spotted downtown, but overall the city looked relatively clean in the wake of Canada Day festivities.

Although an emergency council meeting was held last week to complete funding for the \$1.2-billion streetcar purchase, the regularly scheduled meeting cannot take place, the city explained.

"[A] typical council meeting often considers over 100 items over a period of days. A regular council meeting is normally supported by unionized staff who provide services to operate the facility, print and distribute council materials, provide information technology and audio visual services," the release noted.

"Also, a large complement of senior managers (nonunion staff) are required to be present and answer questions posed at council. Non-union staff have been redeployed to maintain critical services."

Some 24,000 indoor workers represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79, and some 6,000 employees represented by CUPE Local 416, walked off the job simultaneously almost two weeks ago. Negotiations continue but are bogged down over the city's plan to reform sick-day benefits that allow employees to bank up to 18 sick days a year and cash it out at the end of their careers.