

Fiona Crean hired to field public complaints on city services

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Staff Reporter

There's a new Fixer in town, aiming to resolve complaints and identify bigger problems in need of citywide solutions.

Fiona Crean is settling into her job as Toronto's first ombudsman, with marching orders to adjudicate between citizens dissatisfied with city services – or lack of same – and the bureaucrats in charge.

"Fundamentally, it's about ensuring city government is doing its very best in delivering services to the residents," said Crean, previously an ombudsman at York University and executive director of the Ontario ombudsman's office.

"I'm not in the business of making decisions, I'm in the business of helping city council hold the civil service accountable. My role is to make recommendations."

Toronto is just the second Canadian city, after Montreal, to hire an ombudsman's office to field public complaints and try to correct the problems.

It's a lot like what The Fixer does for *Star* readers, but Crean, who started in November, is rowing a much bigger boat. She has the substantial task of advocating for the public without stepping on the toes of city managers and staff, while tutoring the bureaucracy on the value of her role.

There's also the delicate business of managing her political masters on city council. Some councillors are skeptical about the need for an ombudsman, saying the \$1.2 million start-up budget is a frill in a tough economy and that it's their job to resolve constituents' beefs.

Crean considers those challenges part of the learning curve – for everyone. Since the role of municipal ombudsman is new, key players need to be shown how the office can streamline getting easily fixed complaints resolved, while spotting wider problems.

A big part of her job will be to examine "how the city bureaucracy responds to potential systemic issues."

"My experience in doing this work elsewhere is it's far better to get a systemic fix on a problem, for the public interest, than it is to continuously go back and deal with the same individual complaint," she said.

"A really simple way to approach it is to go in and fix the problem, at a second level to investigate, and at a third level to do preventative work."

City council approved the ombudsman's budget Tuesday as part of the overall 2009 budget. The money will be used to hire a staff of seven to triage calls and emails, directing those requiring simpler fixes to individual departments while hiving off more complicated problems for the ombudsman's office.

"If you think in terms of servicing 2.6 million residents," a staff of seven and a \$1.2 million budget is "fiscally conservative and responsible," she said, noting Montreal's equivalent, in a smaller city, resolves an average of 1,300 complaints annually.

Crean is still working on a process to handle thousands of requests, noting her office will complement

rather than compete with Toronto's overdue 311 service, a one-phone-number system for all calls to the city.

She said the office will start taking complaints later this month.

Crean concedes that a few people will always be unhappy with municipal services.

In other words, there will be no shortage of work any time soon for The Fixer.

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