

CUP CONTROVERSY

Money buys city advice - and time to cover its mess

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Attention focused on a \$50,000 grant to unnamed consultants yesterday as city hall's notorious coffee cup tempest continued to consume it, raising questions about the future of Mayor David Miller.

Officials scrambled in the wake of revelations that the Miller regime had hired consultants to help develop an alternative to the heavy-handed coffee-cup lid ban it attempted - without success - to implement last year.

Embattled city waste czar Geoff Rathbone went so far as to suggest that Waste Diversion Ontario, a privately funded "non-Crown corporation" that handles hot-potato waste issues on behalf of the Ontario government, could ultimately contribute half of the \$50,000 cost.

But that remains to be seen. "I can't comment until I see an application," WDO executive director Glenda Gies said yesterday, adding that such consultations are normally "not our scope."

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The growing boondoggle comes on the heels of an earlier council decision to spend \$50,000 on a pilot project to remove so-called "windrows" left by snow plows at the mouths of public laneways - seen as a stalking horse for a potentially unaffordable new service in the cash-strapped city. The difference, however, is that nobody planned the collapse of the coffee-lid ban.

It began as a typical nanny-state initiative to ban plastic lids from take-out coffee cups - a cost-free gambit intended to impress the green crowd, as led by Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker, an unabashed environmentalist who took control of the crucial works committee at the beginning of Mayor Miller's second term.

That's when the bumbles began. Mr. De Baeremaeker's radical proposal to ban lids touched off a storm of protest among outraged private-sector coffee purveyors, led by national icon Tim Hortons. Pushed to the wall, the would-be reformers retreated, delaying the ban in order to undertake in-depth consultations on the matter with industry.

Now, they appear to be covering their tracks with a flood of public money. The meetings with industry have dragged on and will not be complete until this summer, according to officials. The reason: The theglobeandmail.com/servlet/.../TPStory...

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have dragged on and will not be complete until this summer, according to officials. The reason: The unnamed consultants have yet to report their findings.

But the delay will accomplish more than creating new opportunities to waste taxpayer dollars covering up political messes. Crucially, it will buy Mr. De Baeremaeker a few more weeks to substantiate his outlandish claim to have discovered a recyclable lid in coffee-mad Seattle.

Despite the fact that it has made several appearances on local television, only one such artifact is known to exist - and its alleged manufacturer has consistently refused to respond to Canadian media inquiries.

The recyclable lid is the result of top-secret research for the U.S. Navy, according to Mr. De Baeremaeker, and should be ready for testing at the city hall cafeteria before the June deadline for the end of consultations comes and goes. In its absence, however, industry opposition prevails.

The lengthy consultations suggest that industry sources were 100 per cent correct in their claims that making a recyclable coffee-cup lid was an impossible task. Indeed, Mr. Rathbone has already hinted that the city, rather than banning plastic lids outright, is willing to settle for slight changes that might make them easier to recycle.

In light of recent revelations, however, it is hard to see how even that might work. Existing plastic coffee lids are already recyclable, according to Tim Hortons spokesman Nick Javor and other industry veterans. Nothing but blind ideological opposition, coupled with a stubborn refusal to install the correct sorting equipment, prevents them going into the blue box right now.

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