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>>> "Rider, David" <drider@thestar.ca> 3/28/2011 2:07 AM >>>

I am writing to you as urban affairs bureau chief for the Toronto Star on a matter of important public interest.

I recently became aware that there are proposed measures in a confidential attachment to GM2.12 Councillor Protection at City Properties – Update
<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2011.GM2.12>
that would affect reporters' access to parts of City Hall and councillors' offices.

If this is true, I strongly protest both the recommendations and the flawed, exclusionary process being undertaken.

Reining in members of the press gallery on the grounds of councillors' security is nonsensical. To my knowledge, no reporter from the Toronto Star or any other accredited member of the City Hall press gallery has posed any security threat to any councillor.

I understand the natural impulse of many politicians to keep reporters, and their sometimes difficult questions asked on behalf of Torontonians, at a distance. It is not the kind of impulse, I believe, that Torontonians expect to see sanctioned by staff or councillors themselves.

The current system, where reporters in the gallery have card access to the second-floor area containing councillors' offices during certain times of the day, is a well-functioning recognition of the important job that reporters perform on behalf of Torontonians. It must be noted that reporters cannot invade councillors' actual offices and we cannot compel any politician to speak to us.

To lump accredited members of the press gallery together with lobbyists and protesters, as I understand this confidential report does, is unfair and fails to recognize obvious differences, including the fact that, should the conduct of a gallery member ever be called into question, they could face sanction from the gallery itself.

There is also an important privacy issue. We routinely receive confidential information from sources, often in person. To force reporters to make appointments and register in writing, if that is what is being proposed, would be handing city officials a list of our sources, some of whom ask to be confidential. That is unacceptable and counter to the public good.

The valuable public interest role of such sources in bringing important information to light is well-established, and known to many councillors first-hand.

Finally, as I understand the item, the proposed new restrictions on the media would remain secret until after council approved them. This is unusual and troubling given that, when city staff raised these exact same concerns one year ago, they asked to meet with gallery members. Information was exchanged and concerns allayed.

The current secretive process was justified to me by a top city communications person as: "Everyone is well aware of the media's position on this issue." I am shocked that assumptions are considered good enough, and would be interested to hear of other public interest decisions where that benchmark was considered adequate.

Thanks,
David Rider

