

Conservative think-tank training city hall hopefuls

By Jason Markusoff, March 16, 2013

Calgary city council has embraced some more classically left-leaning policies, such as a major expansion of bike lanes and property tax hikes well above inflation.

The Preston Manning think tank's mission to make city halls across Canada more conservative has begun in Calgary, with a clutch of candidates trying to win in October's ward races.

The Reform party founder's Manning Centre for Building Democracy has launched a foray into municipal politics — in a realm where candidates and voters have tended to resist ideological branding, and in a city that embraces conservatives federally and provincially but far less so at the civic level.

The organization is insisting it's not running a slate of candidates, but at least five challengers in five wards have begun training and attending seminars with the group, at no cost so far to them. They largely agree that city council needs to be more conservative.

"I surely believe that, after all the fiascos we've had. We've got to get a grip on spending," said Joe Magliocca, who's on his third try this year to win Ward 2.

Voters have tended to overlook partisan ties in major council elections. Dave Bronconnier's past federal Liberal candidacies didn't prevent him from winning three straight mayoral elections, while former alderman Ric McIver's bid to run as a prominent conservative failed against the non-aligned Naheed Nenshi in the 2010 race.

The Manning Centre, however, is launching their "municipal governance project" in Calgary, and has already held a few workshops and seminars for a handful of politicians and would-be politicians covering areas like government roles and campaign organization.

“They’re going to hold some stuff on fundraising, campaign college, and training different people on your teams if need be,” said Kevin Taylor, taking on Druh Farrell in Ward 7 for the second straight race.

Joining the wards 2 and 7 hopefuls are two fellow candidates from last election, James Maxim (Ward 11) and Sean Chu (Ward 4), as well as first-time candidate Jordan Katz in Ward 9. Nobody has stepped forward yet to take on Nenshi, the popular mayor that many city watchers believe will be hard to topple.

Not much has been made public about the mechanics and scope of this program, and anticipated outcomes for the Oct. 21 civic election. To some sitting aldermen being targeted by those self-identifying conservatives, the Manning Centre work is perceived as an unwelcome intrusion.

“From what I’m hearing, there is a desire to insert a degree of partisan politics that has no place in municipal government,” said Ward 11 Ald. Brian Pincott, a former federal NDP candidate. After a fairly divisive last term, he said a “joy” of city politics is to feel OK agreeing with the more conservative Andre Chabot or Peter Demong if he agrees with their ideas, or to politely disagree at other times.

Dimitri Pantazopoulos, the Manning Centre municipal project manager, referred all questions to a spokesman. He said Manning himself would speak to the Herald, but not until next week.

However, Pantazopoulos and Manning senior fellow David Seymour, laid out some of their vision for the program at a conference in Ottawa last week. Both men see city hall politics as a field dominated by overspenders and over-regulators, and want that changed.

“We’re getting our lunch handed to us by people who don’t have a conservative philosophy, so the answer to that is getting more people of conservative ideals onto city council,” Pantazopoulos, a Victoria-based former federal Conservative pollster, said to a conference seminar.

In an appeal for Calgary volunteers, he explained: “We’re offering support through essentially training and campaign help. This is not a slate. We’re not running a conservative party. We’re assisting like-minded people.”

Seymour, who recently joined the Manning Centre from a Regina-based think-tank, took aim in his presentation at a council in “conservative Calgary” that dictates the number of city taxis, and has too much urban planning for his taste.

“The problem is really the lack of a script, and our idea is to create a new manifesto based on what exactly is the role of government, and hopefully put the municipal genie back in the bottle,” he said. “Because, right now in Calgary, we’re probably experiencing a bit of municipal megalomania.”

The organization has so far held a few events as part of its municipal project, including a private seminar last month with Seymour and a public lecture by a senior figure from the Cato Institute, a U.S. libertarian-leaning group.

The attendees to some events have included sitting aldermen, including Ward 3 Ald. Jim Stevenson, who said he’s a friend to Manning.

“From what I’ve talked to Preston, their main objective is to give some conservative business-type training, to motivate people to run on more of a conservative platform,” said Stevenson, who agreed that council should have more business-minded members.

This Calgary council has embraced some more classically left-leaning policies — like a major expansion of bike lanes and property tax hikes well above inflation — but they’ve also been comfortable testing out contracting the private sector for parks maintenance and pursuing public-private partnerships to build new infrastructure.

“I think that what’s really important for Calgary city council is that we have a diverse group that reflects a diversity of interests,” said Ward 4 Ald. Gael MacLeod, who is “adamant” about not identifying herself as liberal or conservative.

Many of the wards with Manning Centre project participants are dominated by inner-city neighbourhoods which have favoured the Liberal party in provincial contests. Many of these candidates don’t want a Manning conservative label to stick to them — and Katz thinks it could hinder his chances in some parts of his district.

“In parts of it would be helpful, and in other parts of it, probably not so much so,” he said. “But I’m not worried about branding myself as a conservative. I’m going to go out and am going to represent issues that matter to Calgarians, specifically the Calgarians who live in Ward 9.”

Maxim, in Ward 11, comes to the Manning group with an opponent’s tag — as a former Liberal candidate and longtime campaign manager.

“I guess I’m acceptable or they view me as a candidate of value, even though I have a background as being a Liberal,” Maxim said. “And if they want to move the program forward or bring better government to city hall, they’re willing to help me, to balance off my, let’s say, background that I have within the Liberal party.”