



London
CANADA

***Presentation to City
Council
by Jeff Fielding, CAO***

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

I am grateful finally to be able to speak directly to Council. It's been a long week without contact – I have not had much of an opportunity to talk or discuss the matter with any of you.

I don't have control over the reporting in the media. I only have control of what I say to you directly today. This is a defining moment in my relationship with this council so I hope that your minds are not already made up and there is no rush to judgment.

Absenteeism is a management responsibility. I am the most senior manager in the Corporation and I am accountable to this council and the community. I am here today for that purpose.

There has been much reporting and considerable speculation about absenteeism at the City during the last 5-6 days.

This issue strikes at the heart of everyone. It's an affront to our taxpayers if absenteeism persists as reported. And it is demoralizing to hard working City employees who come to work everyday ready to serve the Community if the reporting has been exaggerated. All Londoners have a shared interest in the outcome.

However, the concern goes beyond absenteeism, it focuses directly on the issue of administrative leadership at City Hall and it is central to the confidence and trust council and the community need to have in its civic administration.

During the past week all the stereotypical views of public service workers have surfaced. Concerns about dedication and commitment, entitlement, and our work ethic have all been raised. The entire workforce feels the impact and effect.

I have said to you on many occasions that I am proud to be a public servant and honoured to work for the people of London, and I know I speak for your employees when I say so today. Let me provide some overview comments before I review my report with you.

Several days ago concern at Board of Control was raised about a position under recruitment called a Specialist - Health and Wellness.

This position was awarded on January 24th, 2007 from our Interest Arbitration with the London Professional Firefighters' Association.

In fairness to council it was over a year ago that this award was made. The final decisions on matters outstanding from the arbitration did not happen until December, 2007 so we waited until

the issues were resolved. In hindsight it would have been more appropriate to remind you about this award.

The arbitrator awarded the City “exclusion” for a Manager of Attendance that could be shared with the Corporation for this purpose. This was very significant in recognizing the City’s arguments that attendance needed to be addressed at the Fire Department.

The arbitrator also awarded provisions to address absenteeism and implement sick leave controls and, provided a new medical form to manage attendance.

The award is important for another reason – it clearly identifies how sensitive the labour relations issues are - particularly involving absenteeism.

The concerns about absenteeism and its costs within the Fire Department are not new to Council. This Council has received a variety of updates from the Fire Chief on these matters in public session since 2005. The City’s public brief to the arbitrator contained substantive information to support the City’s contention that there was a concern about absenteeism in the Fire Department.

The current situation still remains challenging. Chief Kobarda has prepared an update of his last report to Council to provide everyone with the most current information.

Chief Kobarda needs the Manager of Attendance position awarded by the arbitrator. But upon reflection I believe that the focus of the posted position for a corporate “Health and Wellness Specialist” may not be specific enough to meet his needs and I will make a recommendation on this matter in my report for change.

Last Wednesday at Board of Control Councillor Van Meerbergen asked that an added item on the agenda be included to discuss the Health and Wellness Specialist position – it was a good decision to do so.

However, as each of you on Board of Control appreciates there was no report ready to address the added item, and further no detailed information was available from administration.

Only three very high level numbers were shared – certainly insufficient information to be able to draw any conclusion about absenteeism other than that there is need for concern. Board of Control asked for a public report to be tabled in April, 2008 which was the appropriate recommendation.

However, since then there has been considerable speculation about attendance at the City and numerous comments made in the absence of any substantive information.

I’ll ensure that council receives the public report requested by Board of Control today to thoroughly address employee absenteeism. Perhaps other conclusions will be drawn once council has the proper information to discuss. But I doubt that I can make up for the loss of confidence this week.

Speculation about 35 lost days of work that was one of the numbers shared at Board of Control is in fact related to the Dearness Home.

Once again this council and particularly the members of the Community and Protective Services Committee that serve as the Board of Management for the Dearness Home are well aware of

our rebuilding efforts to exceed the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care's orders for compliance. Mr. Fair in his numerous updates has been very thorough in his remarks about the issues at Dearness Home, and the mounting pressures to recruit qualified staff and address workplace issues.

This council also has been fully engaged in the corrective and disciplinary action that administration has taken to address behaviour and abuse. It cannot be said that decisive action has not been taken when warranted.

I also will remind council that the issue of attendance and absenteeism was first flagged in the 2006 Budget submission, and further defined with a business case for the 2007 Budget.

An editorial in the London Free Press last week stated that no meaningful change has happened at City Hall and that City Hall leadership is absent implying lack of accountability and oversight. I'll explain to you today the measures that we have taken on the matter of absenteeism. I hope you have reserved your opinion until the facts have been shared because significant work has been completed and is ongoing.

I'll remind all of you that since my arrival in May 2004 this organization has never stood down from tough issues. We have rebuilt our corporate culture; addressed substantive concerns related to Human Rights and Code of Conduct violations.

We have had to meet the test of public scrutiny of City Hall behaviour. We re-established relations with our Unions; and, invested in management through our partnership with Ivey. Together we stabilized our financial position.

We have worked through the concerns expressed in the Ontario Fire Marshall's report; and, addressed the important issues raised by the Ministry concerning long term care at Dearness Home.

We have opened up new and lasting relations with our communities; and, we have reached out to our employees to make them proud of working for the City of London.

Currently work is well underway on a service based approach to our organizational structure and budget; establishing a Performance Management System; rolling out Departmental Business Plans; and finalizing a Corporate Attendance Management Program that now is being reviewed by outside legal counsel.

This is no KUMBAYA as The Free Press stated, or a group hug or some summer camp game – this is serious work with serious consequences and to have such progress trivialized and mocked illustrates a lack of understanding about modern corporate leadership. Fear and intimidation in the workplace do not produce results.

Many "experts" have been quoted in the London Free Press this past week. Most agree that engaged employees who trust the organization and share pride in its collective accomplishments is the only way forward. I have spent a considerable amount of my time on this work and I believe in its purpose.

I will report to council today that administration has been engaged in addressing absenteeism – as it was with Human Rights – for the last four years. That we understand the absenteeism issues, but that we may not fully understand completely all its reasons for existence.

That we have a simple and straight forward strategic approach in place for progress; that we have been focused on its priorities and, that we have a concrete plan to move forward.

In summary, let me close with some final thoughts:

Yes we have absenteeism issues that are systemic and persistent. Appropriate, focused and strategic action has been taken over the past four years to quantify the problem and begin reducing its impact.

I have demonstrated over the four years of working for this council, and I trust again today that my purpose in resolving such issues is steadfast. Some progress with respect to absenteeism has been made, and much more effort is needed to control the issues.

Careful consideration has been given to a slate of proposed recommendations that will have an impact – much of that work was already ongoing. I hope council will endorse these suggestions to move forward.