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Royson James

Absurdity piled on top of arrogance.

That's the best way to explain what took place at the Toronto Community Housing Corporation board meeting Wednesday when one man decided to sell off 22 city-owned houses.

With a packed audience sneering back at him — one shouting “shame!”, all but one brave soul opposed to the sale — board chair Case Ootes didn't argue, only because he couldn't argue with, er, himself.

There was no mental jousting in search of a solid policy position, and no chance for mindless debate among board members. All decisions were, of necessity, unanimous, even as the public pleaded for alternatives and a deferral to consider other options.

Such is the case when a public body is reduced to the farce of one-man rule.

Now, Ootes' decision may indeed have been the correct one. You could be convinced to sell off most, if not all, the 22 city-owned houses put on the block and use the anticipated \$15.7 million windfall to provide more and better homes for scores of citizens who need it.

There is, in fact, a solid case to be made — one that was made long before Mayor Rob Ford took office and long before he installed the one-man board to oversee operations of the housing company. This sell-off is not Ford's idea, though he agrees with it. And even though it aligns with Ootes' thoughts, he's not the architect. This stretches back to 2007.

But on Wednesday, no one was convinced, only repulsed.

Instead of making the case for the sale, the city's administration spat in the public's eye.

Such arrogance. Such autocratic excess. Such unnecessary and undemocratic indulgence.

In case you missed it, the recommendation to finally sell the houses, after years of study, came before the housing company's board Wednesday. Now, it's always controversial to attempt the sale of public housing units, no matter how justified. As such, it is always wise to proceed with caution, be as transparent as possible, and follow good governance and proper procedure.

For this reason alone, one would have expected the housing company to have been on high alert. But there is more.

Housing advocates and activists have no faith in the Rob Ford administration, especially after his musings about privatizing social housing. They were further alarmed that Ford fired the housing board over scandalous spending and installed a one-man caretaker. Alarm has grown to concern because the caretaker is Ootes. As a councillor, Ootes campaigned to sell off the city's single house portfolio and use the money to fix the broken housing stock.

Under the circumstances, Ootes should have removed himself as far as possible from this item. He should have deferred the vote to the new board when constituted in June. “You know my position. The evidence is overwhelming. But because I am tainted, I'll leave it to the full



Acting managing director Case Ootes, operating as a one-man board, approves the sale of 22 single-family homes owned by the Toronto Community Housing Corp.

Jayne Poisson/TORONTO STAR

board,” Ootes could have said Wednesday.

As such, respect, not revulsion, would have been his due today.

Understand that these houses will be sold. The previous board was clearly headed this way. City council will vote in favour. These are the worst of the close to 900 homes the city owns and they are in terrible shape, costing more than is wise to fix up and maintain.

There are protections in place: Tenants will be relocated. Those paying “market rent” (seven out of 10) can’t be evicted easily. Units have to be replaced someplace else and won’t be lost. Tenants with exemptions will keep them until death. And the housing company has policies in place to ease the transition.

All Ford — and Ootes — had to do was go slow, respect the fact that there is a perception they are inimical to public housing, and show some good faith by waiting two months.

Instead, it’s full steam ahead.

It is the way of a marauding force high on ideological excess. It’s not good governance.

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