



News

Ford's risky business cards

So giving taxpayer money to your own company isn't a conflict of interest?

|By Ben Spurr

Reports last week that Rob Ford channeled public money to his family's printing company no doubt sent the mayor's opponents leaping through city bylaws to find out whether he broke the law. Are there finally grounds to take our divisive mayor to court? Sorry anti-Ford Nation, the answer appears to be no.

The Toronto Star reported last Friday that the mayor used his office budget to buy \$1,579 worth of premium business cards from Deco Label & Tags, the company his father founded and his brother Councillor Doug Ford still presides over as president. The price is roughly four times that usually charged by the city's printers that most councillors use.

Although the amount of money involved is small, Ford's critics accused him of hypocrisy in light of his election promise to usher in a new era of financial propriety at city hall. Some suggested choosing his family's firm for a no-bid contract is a conflict of interest.

Ford has since promised to pay back the city for the business cards, but the odour of impropriety at the mayor's office remains.

The business card purchase doesn't appear to have violated province's Municipal Conflict of Interest Act, because according to municipal law expert Stephen D'Agostino, the act only deals with decisions that go to a vote before council. The Deco deal was apparently made independently by the mayor's office.

The city of Toronto's Code of Conduct says that councillors must avoid "real and apparent" conflicts of interest, but D'Agostino says that the code has no teeth and the worst punishment those who violate it would receive is a slap on the wrist.

"Under the Conflict of Interest Act the matter goes to court, and if you're found to be in conflict you lose your seat no questions asked," says D'Agostino, who declined to speak specifically about allegations against Ford. "With the Code of Conduct on the other hand, the worst you can expect is a motion of censure from the rest of the elected officials at council."

According to D'Agostino, how any member of council uses his or her office budget is basically up to their own discretion.

"Hypothetically, if a councillor is given a \$10,000 budget then pretty much he can do whatever he wants with that \$10,000," continues D'Agostino. "The theory is that if you're found to be doing things that are morally questionable or unpopular, then the voters will deal with that at election time."

Calls for tougher municipal conflict of interest laws have grown louder in the wake of the recent inquiry into the conduct of Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion. It concluded that her promotion of a development deal that would have benefited her son to the tune of \$11 million amounted to a conflict of interest, but resulted no punishment for the

nonagenarian mayor.

Stricter laws would be a good idea, says D'Agostino, who has worked on both sides of conflict of interest complaints.

“My impression is that politicians try to follow the rules,” he says, “but the question is whether the rules are appropriate.”

