

Rightly or wrongly, the Ma-Te-Way mess is going to be a defining issue for many candidates seeking positions on Renfrew Town Council. That applies to candidates running for mayor as well as one seeking a council seat.

These are people who served on the 2018-2022 council, the one where the Ma-Te-Way expansion was just finding its legs, with a little over \$18 million in budgeted costs. As we know, that number ballooned to over \$30 million, and it's suggested in some quarters that, when all is said and done, what with borrowing costs, fees, and additional infrastructure costs, that number could approach \$50 million in the end.

It can't be a comfortable feeling to know that you're being blamed for that.

Tom Sidney, Peter Emon, Mike Coulas, and Sandi Heins seem to be carrying that burden at the moment, with no shortage of opponents gleefully bringing it up on the campaign trail and in sidewalk conversations.

Before I really get into this, I have to ask a series of framing questions

Does anyone really think that any of the four individuals above would willingly get their shoulders behind a project that could lead to their political undoing? Would any of these four willingly paint themselves in to a scandal? Would any of them honestly do anything or support anything that would cause incredible harm to the community and its property tax rate?

I think if we were to put aside any possible petty differences, the answer to all of those questions has to be no.

I've been doing a lot of reading, and not so much of it being the kind I like to do. Reading Town Council meeting minutes and committee meeting minutes, if you can successfully find them, could never be compared to a good mystery fiction, although there is plenty of mystery in these minutes.

And by the way, I'm not talking about council and committee meeting minutes from the so-called notorious 2018-2022 council. Instead, I've been reading meeting and committee minutes from the 2023 council.

Why?

Because big projects don't stop on a dime and they have little respect for election cycles. So while Ma-Te-Way expansion got going between 2018-2022, it continued to be in motion in 2023 after the mayor and councillors were sworn in.

Former Parks and Recreation Committee chair Tom Sidney was now the mayor, Peter Emon remained the reeve, and Heins and Coulas were defeated in the mayor's race and were now off council altogether.

Committees now had new chairs, and nowhere would that become more important than the Parks and Recreation Committee that had and has oversight over the Ma-Te-Way expansion.

That committee is now chaired by mayoral candidate Jason Legris.

I bring this to light because Councillor Legris appears to be one of the contending individuals making hay from the argument that three of his opponents are impossibly tainted by the Ma-Te-Way imbroglio and can never again be trusted with any aspect of the public purse. He thumps about transparency and accountability at every opportunity.

And so that's what I plan to share in this piece, perhaps additional transparency and accountability.

Before 2022, Ma-Te-Way was Tom Sidney's file, but since being sworn in as a councillor after the 2022 election, it's been Legris. And I hate to say this, but the additional overages that caused that expansion project to explode the way they did seemed to have taken place during Mr. Legris' turn at the committee wheel.

Not saying it's his fault. Seriously unfortunate timing for him. But still, how to get out in front of it? I'm just saying that I have a suspicion that personal political aspirations were uppermost in mind at the moment, maybe more so than any public considerations.



I plan to support my argument with materials from those meeting minutes, and I don't want anyone to think that I've been sitting on this information so that I could make a strategic leap out of the bushes to cause vexation to Mr. Legris' campaign. I'm neither smart nor talented enough to pull stuff like that off. The timing was simply dependant upon my ability to seek out relevant documentation and then go through it, and nothing more sinister than that.

As I said before, the Ma-Te-Way expansion was a project that has washed over both the 2018-2022 and 2022-2026 councils. So if one of those groups is to be "vilified" for its role in all of this, when does accountability for the second group kick in? Because at the end of 2022, the projected costs for the expansion were actually pretty close to the original \$18 million budget. It was in the following years where the money exploded.

When Mr. Legris was in the position of oversight.

I completely understand the idea that things put in

motion by the earlier council manifested themselves in the second council's term, something that is, again, oblivious to election cycles. And a fair statement to make. It's just that, as I follow the documentation, I see no urgency expressed about things that were happening in real-time. The numbers were right there and they were getting higher, but nothing of alarm seems to be indicated from the committee chair through the minutes.

Do I blame Legris personally for those overages? Of course not, no more than I can blame any of the others. But do I suggest that he's possibly used this issue to his own political advantage? Absolutely I do.

And the thing is, at least from the documents I'm looking at, which are meeting minutes, there appears to be no registration of ominous concern creeping into the status reports, even as the project overages began incrementally creeping up to \$30 million from \$20 million in just twelve months. No hue and cry that I can determine. A 10% project contingency fund of \$1.8 million begins its inevitable creep downwards, but no alarms for the committee chair? Or did it just "*get past him*," one of the criticisms directed at the other three main candidates for mayor?

I want to make sure that I'm not blaming anyone personally for any of this, but I do find it somewhat disingenuous for a candidate to distance himself from his opponents politically in an election campaign by pointing the Ma-Te-Way finger of incrimination at them. How come Chairperson Legris didn't get outraged and tell us earlier?

Or did he need to position himself first?

He chaired that committee, and for twelve months I don't see he or anyone else really sounding an alarm of impending calamity on the horizon over Ma-Te-Way. It's just like the whole issue suddenly exploded onto everyone's radar, the outrage was ignited, and the howls of protest directed towards members of the 2018-2020 council began.

That's convenient.

If I didn't know any better, I'd feel that this outrage, while legitimate, was maneuvered and manipulated for political benefit by some people at the expense of others, most likely with an eye towards the 2026 election we're into right now.

Identify your future political rivals far in advance, adorn every one of them with a political scarlet letter of shame, then tarnish them completely with the stain of Ma-Te-Way. Differentiate yourself in the process as the only person running for mayor not touched in any way by that issue. And then encouraging angry voters to apply the Ma-Te-Way filter when they go to vote and send these people packing, once and for all.

It's brilliant, but again, completely disingenuous. And very much political. Cynical even.

Just saying.

I believe there to be something attached to Mr. Legris on this score, but by no means do I mean that accusatorially. I'm just suggesting the only difference between the candidates being the council they happened to have served on, past, present, or both. Except for the fact that voters are more than likely to "punish" the other three while giving Mr. Legris a pass, mostly owing to their likely unawareness of his own involvement as chair of a crucial committee at a crucial time,

I go back again to the questions I framed as to the culpability, or degree of culpability these people may have in the Ma-Te-Way expansion mess. Do I think any one of these four mayoral candidates would willingly put themselves in a position that would cause the community financial harm and virtually destroy their political futures, perhaps forever?

My answer is no, I just don't think so.

But I only see one of the four pointing an accusatory finger at the others, even though holding the same committee chair as his predecessor Tom Sidney.

Ma-Te-Way enveloped and washed over all of them like a tsunami. But I believe one of them recognized the political danger immediately and made immediate efforts to distance himself from all the damaging aspects of the project. Nowhere have I ever heard it mentioned that Jason Legris was the chair of the Parks and Recreation Committee for a critical period of time when the project jumped \$10 million over-budget. That's not because it's a secret or anything. It's because I was poorly informed. Admittedly my fault.

Brian Belanger, in his Facebook group RENFREW ELECTION 2026, calls for the return of the Harry Truman "*the buck stops here*" idea that accountability essentially ends up on the desk of the chief political boss. In this case, Belanger suggests that ultimate accountability belongs to the mayor.

So I have to ask then, which mayor do we hold accountable? The now departed Don Eady of 2018-2022? Tom Sidney of 2022-2026? Both? All subsequent mayors?

Ma-Te-Way is not going away. This will get more expensive. The original ice surface has reached the point where it needs to be replaced, and that has a price tag of close to \$1.5 million. While it cost a lot to build the place, we're still going to have to keep it open. The expansion was expensive, but it was an expansion grafted onto an existing structure. The existing stuff is starting to reach its best-before date, and that's gonna be an expensive proposition in its own right. So it seems to me that Ma-Te-Way will continue to be an issue of some sort going forward.

Egregious mistakes were made at the beginning of the Ma-Te-Way file, many apparently by actors not named here today. Those mistakes were combustible in nature, and soon, the reality on the ground was really starting to look bad. They presented other decisions that needed to be made, perhaps resulting in other mistakes that have added to the alive-and-running costs associated with Ma-Te-Way.

If Jason Legris gets elected mayor, might we expect that the Ma-Te-Way buck will stop at his desk as well? And will he accept any degree of political accountability of his own for anything happening over his period as potential Head of Council? Like I said, Ma-Te-Way is going to touch a lot of future mayors at some point. Whether the fire was started by others, at some point it becomes your fire to solve.

When he started his term as chair of the Parks and Wreck Committee, the emerging crisis was a known reality. I mean it had to have been if you're the chair of the very committee with oversight responsibility. Why did we not hear of this earlier? Or I suppose put another way, where was the outrage then?

Yes, Mr. Legris gets a free pass on the start of the Ma-Te-Way disaster. But there's still an issue out there on this topic that's humming, that's for sure. And he's had his ear on this for the past four years. Enough time to formulate political strategy to be used against future political opponents.

Mr. Belanger indicates that he has one more post to make prior to election day. In it he suggests that he's going to make his own voting intentions public. All the while he has made Map-Te-Way a big deal, and nobody its saying it isn't. But I suspect he'll be supporting Jason Legris for mayor.

I believe that was the point all along.