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Treasurer kept city finances shipshape

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Frank Gowman's first stint as a city treasurer saw him working hard to justify a local government amalgamation, cracking numbers to make things look fiscally benign in a controversial merger between Sarnia city and Sarnia township.

"I was supposed to prove amalgamation was good," said Gowman, 56, who retires Friday after 18 years minding Cambridge's books. "I proved the taxes were going to go up (in the township) . . . The township opponents used my study as their main weapon against it." He left Sarnia as Queen's Park ordered the merger in 1991, when offered the job as deputy treasurer in Cambridge, close to friends and family.

Ever since, he's been on the other side of the amalgamation debate, consistently doubting promises that mergers mean tax savings for Cambridge residents.

He's consistently pushed for intermunicipal co-operation to save on taxes and improve services. Gowman cites the Waterloo Region self-insurance pool he helped set up as an example of how working together saved millions over the last decade. Over the same time, other Ontario towns and cities saw private insurance premiums soar due to natural disasters around the world, he said.

"I knew within the first week it was a good move," Gowman said of moving to Cambridge. He praises the positive, "team management culture" he sees getting things done inside Cambridge City Hall.

His career plan was always to take over from treasurer John McIntyre at his retirement. Instead the job was thrust in his lap in 1997, after a heart attack killed the city's first treasurer. Deputy treasurer Steve Fairweather has already been chosen by city council to replace Gowman.

Gowman was born in Brantford and lived near St. George for a about a year, before the family moved to Goderich, then to Cambridge for Grades 1 to 3 at Highland Public School.

After that, another move took him to Wallaceburg, where he attended high school.

He was studying math at University of Waterloo when he met Rosemary, whom he would later marry. The math teacher at Galt Collegiate Institute plans to retire on the same day as her husband.

Originally, Gowman thought he'd have a career in computer science, but in his third year he turned to accounting. All three of the couple's sons -- Richard, David and Paul -- took up the career torch in his stead.

"They didn't have a choice with me and a mom who was a math teacher," he laughed.

In 1976, Gowman started his first job as a junior chartered accountant at a private firm in Sarnia. In 1984, he took a job at Sarnia city hall as director of treasury services. Then he jumped to Cambridge.

"I've always appreciated the frankness and direction you have given to council over the years," Mayor Doug Craig said to Gowman last Monday, at the treasurer's last council meeting.

He praised Gowman and his department for helping keep council on track to retire the city's debt and financing the city's new \$30-million city office building without any new debt.

While the four-storey office building earned Gowman warm words, it wasn't his favourite city project. His fear of heights prevented him from visiting his fourth-floor office while it was under construction. Now, four months after the building opened, he remains leery of some of the panoramic views from the windows.

Quick to laugh and full of self-effacing jokes, Gowman has the ability to make an eye-glazing city budget spring to life by comparing it to a family's household finances. What's good for one is good for the other, he said.

There's nothing wrong with debt, he said, so long as it's used judiciously as the tool it is. It's financially unhealthy to use it as a crutch to carry you from paycheque to paycheque -- or to feed interest payments that inflate the cost of civic projects.

In retirement, Gowman plans to continue his passion for curling, a sport he started at age 15 in high school. A skip at the Galt Curling Club, his teams have won provincial seniors championships.

Now, instead of walking to work, Gowman has time to go mountain biking on the trails near his Preston home, or play tennis at Victoria Park. He and Rosemary have no plans to sit on the front step and count the cars passing by.

"It's the choice, the ability to do what you want." Once, of course, he completes a year-long kitchen renovation Rosemary has ready for him to start next week.

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