



## ARTICLES OF DISSOLUTION

# A Better Richmond Hill: Lessons and Legacy In Advancing Municipal Democracy

### I. Background: Dissatisfaction and Awakening

A Better Richmond Hill (ABRH) was established in 2021 by a group of concerned Richmond Hill residents as a grassroots nonprofit organization. Its inception was driven by widespread dissatisfaction with a council dominated by pro-developer politicians, whose high-density development plans prioritized commercial interests over residents' quality of life, community well-being, and sustainable urban planning. ABRH became a symbol of collective determination, advocating for a more equitable, livable city governed with transparency and efficiency.

The formation of ABRH was not a spontaneous reaction but the culmination of years of resistance against the city's developer-driven policies. Faced with relentless high-density development pressures, residents recognized that their opposition to individual projects could not address the systemic issues. The root cause was a city council long controlled by entrenched vested interests, including developer lobbies and staff who have the most to gain by preserving economic and bureaucratic privileges and their inherent inefficiencies. To challenge this dynamic, ABRH's founders committed to reshaping the council and promoting policies that prioritized public good over private gain.

ABRH's core team comprised experienced community leaders, professionals, and residents. These individuals shared a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and a unified vision of electing councillors who would represent the public interest over private agendas.

### II. Key Actions and Achievements: Efforts and Impact

#### 1. Exposing Misfeasance and Promoting Transparency

ABRH launched its advocacy with initiatives such as our councillors "report card," which exposed the misconduct and pro-developer bias of certain politicians. This campaign successfully informed the public, highlighting misfeasance and opacity in city governance, and encouraged voters to make educated choices during the last municipal elections.

#### 2. Protests and Community Mobilization

ABRH organized several community rallies to protest against councillors who prioritized special interests over resident concerns. These demonstrations, though bold and confrontational, effectively raised public awareness about governance issues and underscored the critical importance of civic engagement.

#### 3. Electoral Success: Transforming the Council

During the 2022 municipal elections, ABRH's grassroots mobilization succeeded in helping to unseat several pro-developer councillors and to elect candidates who pledged to prioritize resident needs.

These victories brought hope for a new era of governance more representative of the community's values and priorities.

### III. Disappointment and Challenges: Betrayal and Reflection

Despite its electoral successes, ABRH soon faced profound disappointment. Newly elected and re-elected councillors failed to uphold their commitments and election promises, and instead capitulated to the same vested interests they had pledged to challenge. This breach of faith undermined ABRH's progress, allowing high-density developments to advance without suitable regard for sustainability, livability, and community balance.

#### 1. Rubber-Stamping High-Density Development: Long-Term Harm

The new council failed to resist; it acquiesced to entrenched interests, leading to harmful decisions on key plans for future high-density developments throughout Richmond Hill:

- **[Yonge/Highway 7 KDA \(Regional Centre\):](#)**

The provincial government's MZO designated this area as an ultra-high-density development with an unprecedented population density of 170,000 people per square kilometer. Instead of mitigating this flawed plan, the council exacerbated it by further reducing employment opportunities in the KDA. What could have been a sustainable economic hub, akin to "Union Station North," was misguidedly transformed into a commuter town, jeopardizing the city's future sustainability.

- **[Yonge/16th KDA \(Hillcrest Mall\):](#)**

The city incorporated developer proposals into municipal plans without conducting proper professional review. The council's approval, which led to the conversion of two-thirds of Hillcrest Mall's parking space into high-rise residential towers, disregarded the long-term implications for the city's only major shopping centre. This irresponsible decision forfeited a critical opportunity to develop a vibrant mixed-use complex, ultimately compromising both economic growth and the quality of life for residents.

- **[Yonge and Elgin Mills Flood Vulnerable Zone Development:](#)**

The council approved high-rise development in a known flood vulnerable zone at 10684 & 10692 Yonge Street, disregarding environmental impacts and resident safety concerns. [Mayor David West completely reversed his earlier opposition to the project](#), ignoring restrictions outlined in the city's official plan and dismissing resident objections. The lack of environmental assessments and safety evaluations highlighted the double standards and negligence exhibited by certain council members.

#### 2. [Committee of Adjustment \(COA\)](#)

The council's support for developers and the municipality's opaque operational model were particularly evident in its appointments to the Committee of Adjustment (COA). Four of the five appointed members had direct ties to the infill industry, resulting in decisions heavily skewed in favor of developers and showing its institutional bias. As of February 2024, the committee's approval rate exceeded 90%, significantly higher than those of neighboring municipalities, with community objections and planning requirements often being dismissed. When the sole resident representative exposed the COA's lack of transparency and bias, the council chose to remove this individual rather than address the systemic issues, further entrenching the interests of vested groups.

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### 3. [Bureaucratic Inefficiency and Fiscal Imbalance](#)

The municipal government remains plagued by inefficiencies, a lack of transparency, and heavy taxation, which the new council fails to address.

Richmond Hill residents bear the highest per capita tax burden among comparable Ontario municipalities, with revenues largely allocated to rapidly increasing staff salaries and benefits rather than improved public services. For instance, snow removal costs per lane kilometer tripled over a decade, yet service quality has stagnated. Across this council's first three approved city budgets (2023 to 2025), municipal personnel expenses and contracted services costs are set to rise by 18.3%, while inflation during the same period is only 8.1%.

The municipality appears adept at manipulating property tax categories to obscure the true tax burden, making it difficult for residents to fully understand their financial obligations based solely on announced property tax increases. For example, property taxes were divided into two components: the traditional property tax and the rebranded Capital Asset Sustainability Levy (CASL). In 2024, the city announced a 4.7% property tax increase but omitted an additional 1.5% hike from CASL, effectively understating the actual tax burden, which amounted to 6.2%.

Following public criticism and the exposure of these deceptive practices, the city, in 2025, enacted a more than 50% increase in Stormwater fees—essentially an extension of property taxes. This tactic enabled higher revenue collection while presenting a misleadingly lower property tax increase rate to residents. Such practices undermine transparency and make it increasingly difficult for residents to accurately assess their financial commitments.

### 4. **Suppression of Resident Participation**

The council and city administration, including the Committee of Adjustments, skillfully established and manipulated arbitrary procedural rules, such as imposing strict limits on public speaking times and preventing residents from responding to misleading statements made after their delegations during council meetings. These tactics created a series of bureaucratic barriers that significantly hinder meaningful resident participation. By stifling public discourse and limiting opportunities for residents to hold the council accountable, these actions expose a glaring lack of transparency and accountability in governance.

## IV. Lessons Learned: Struggles and Reflections

ABRH's journey provides valuable insights for advancing municipal democracy:

### 1. **Beware the Gap Between Campaign Promises and Political Reality**

Campaign promises often diverge significantly from post-election actions. ABRH's experience underscores the importance of voters critically evaluating candidates' commitments, tracking their post-election performance, and holding them accountable. Meaningful change requires sustained public oversight to ensure that elected officials remain aligned with their promises and the community's interests.

### 2. **Reform Requires Structural Transparency**

Electing new councillors is not a panacea for systemic governance challenges. Without addressing the structural flaws that enable bureaucratic inefficiency and opaque decision-making, even well-intentioned representatives can falter. Sustainable reform necessitates increasing transparency and

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accountability within municipal operations to ensure that decisions are fair, evidence-based, and aligned with community priorities.

### **3. Balancing Power and Diverse Representation**

ABRH's experience illustrates the risks of concentrating power within a single dominant faction. Effective governance requires diverse perspectives that reflect the needs and interests of all stakeholders. Encouraging inclusive decision-making and fostering diverse representation in municipal councils can lead to more transparent and fair outcomes.

### **4. Engaging and Empowering Residents**

Meaningful civic engagement is essential for driving change and holding elected officials accountable. ABRH's journey highlights the need for accessible, inclusive platforms that enable residents to participate in governance, express their concerns, and influence decision-making. Empowering communities through education, advocacy, and transparent processes can strengthen democracy and ensure municipal policies reflect public needs.

### **5. Prioritize Sustainable and Resident-Centred Development**

The approval of several critical, incompatible high-density development plans in Richmond Hill reveals the dangers of prioritizing developer interests over sustainable urban planning. Future efforts must focus on balancing economic development with environmental sustainability, infrastructure capacity, and the well-being of residents. Community-centred development should remain a guiding principle for municipal decision-making.

## **V. Conclusion: ABRH's Dissolution and Future Prospects**

Due to entrenched inefficiencies and resistance to change, ABRH did not fully realize its initial goals and after years of advocacy has ultimately chosen to dissolve, in the face of council's implacable determination to resist residents' efforts to bring about meaningful change as this letter outlines.

However, ABRH's journey offers invaluable lessons and insights into the challenges and opportunities of municipal reform in Richmond Hill. It is hoped that residents will continue to advocate for democratic, transparent, and sustainable urban governance while holding the council accountable. The organization's work has planted the seeds for future efforts, encouraging community members to remain vigilant, engaged, and proactive in shaping the city's future. It is noted that any future organization that may choose to assume the name "A Better Richmond Hill" will not be the same group, as the existing Directors have resigned.

ABRH's story serves as both a cautionary tale and an inspiring exploration of the complexities of municipal reform. It highlights the resilience required to confront entrenched interests and the importance of collective action in striving for progress. While the road to meaningful change is long and fraught with obstacles, every effort contributes to laying a stronger foundation for a more equitable and sustainable governance framework.

The legacy of ABRH reminds us that the pursuit of good governance is a continuous process—one that depends on the integrity, courage, persistence, and commitment of informed and empowered communities.

The Board of Directors  
**A Better Richmond Hill**

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