

Globe and Mail, June 29, 2009

If At First You Don't Succeed....

Jennifer Lewington

Toronto councillor Karen Stintz voted with the majority of council last Friday to double the city's financial contribution (to \$834-million from \$417-million) towards a \$1.2-billion deal to buy 204 replacement streetcars.

But she was not happy with the process that led to the 11th-hour special council meeting to give the Toronto Transit Commission the green light to award the contract to Montreal-based Bombardier Inc.

She and other critics questioned Toronto Mayor David Miller's handling of the streetcar deal because he failed to coax the federal government to come in for a one-third share and match the province. (Ottawa's argument is that streetcars did not qualify for a federal short-term stimulus fund but holds the door open to funding other city projects down the road).

At council, Ms. Stintz tried to move a motion to ask the city's independent Auditor General, Jeff Griffiths, to review the process that ultimately required the city to take a two-thirds share of the total cost (and defer some TTC projects on the books).

The wording of the motion apparently passed muster with the clerk's office, but not city lawyers and council speaker Sandra Bussin who ruled the motion out of order.

But with council, you never say never.

Today, Ms. Stintz said she plans to submit a motion to council's audit committee -- she is not a member but there are enough friendly types to pick up the cudgels for her -- once the city workers' strike is over.

Along with a review of the process, she wants the Auditor General to probe any negative implications from the TTC deferring part of planned bus maintenance project (the big spending does not hit until 2015) to pull off the streetcar deal.

"What are the implications of that long term and how are we going to manage our debt and cost in light of this significant new expenditure, and without adding to over all net debt?" asks Ms. Stintz.

Timing is on her side. The audit committee meets less frequently than council standing committees, but the strike hit just as audit members were to meet. So a reconvened meeting would likely have to come sooner than later. But politics may not be on her side. A friendly vote at the audit committee does not guarantee a "yes" from council.