

Description

The logo of the Municipality appears in a comic strip bubble.

The City of Ottawa logo between French and English quotation marks. Photo: Radio-Canada

The project to turn Ottawa into an officially bilingual city for the 150th anniversary of Confederation is far from over. According to information gathered by Radio-Canada, half of the members of the municipal council are opposed. At the heart of the concerns: costs. But more importantly, the feeling that this project is only a matter of Francophone activists and that its implementation would divide the community.

A text by Catherine Lanthier

Radio-Canada contacted the Mayor and the City of Ottawa's 23 councilors directly to find out if they support the [#OttawaBilingual](#) project. At least 12 are opposed.

AGAINST: 12

INDICATED: 7

FOR: 5

Councilor Mathieu Fleury sought the support of 17 elected municipal officials to be able to table a motion to this effect at the council table. In all likelihood, it will be impossible.

#OttawaBilingual, led by a group of Franco-Ontarian organizations, is trying to sell its project by stating that raising the legal status of the city's bilingualism policy would not entail additional costs. However, the argument does not go to many municipal officials.

The College representative, Rick Chiarelli, feared that such a status would allow those who do not get what they want from the Municipality to turn to the courts.

It would take all of these decisions out of the hands of the [city] council, from the [finance and economic development] committee, and transfer them to the courts. Unelected courts, which are not accountable.

Rick Chiarelli, Counselor, College District

"People who say there will be no change, it will not affect jobs, it's a myth from another century – and the people of the City are smart enough to know it", Argues Jan Harder, who represents the Barrhaven neighborhood.

We provide excellent services in the official languages. I have never heard anyone ask for more.

Jan Harder, Councilor, Barrhaven Neighborhood

Marianne Wilkinson, counselor of Kanata-Nord, pointed out that "there are more Chinese than francophones" in her neighborhood and that the current services in the language of Molière are sufficient.

His neighbor South Kanata, Allan Hubley, also notes that a wide variety of languages are spoken in his neighborhood. "We are trying to ensure that everyone is served appropriately. It's not the one or the other, it's everyone who deserves services from the City," he believes.

In addition, like Mayor Jim Watson, Mr. Hubley believes that the current bilingualism policy is functional and appreciated by citizens.

Read also: Graham Fraser believes in official bilingualism project in Ottawa
Did the mergers kill the project?

A clear trend emerges when these results are observed. The further away from downtown Ottawa, the greater the opposition to official bilingualism.

We presented these responses to Caroline Andrew, Director of the Center for Governance Studies at the University of Ottawa. "It's almost to make us rethink the issue of mergers!" She exclaims.

In January 2001, the new City of Ottawa was created by merging 12 local governments. At the same time, support for bilingualism has been diluted, says Andrew.

It's clear that the mergers have given much more power to the suburbs and much less power in the downtown area.

Caroline Andrew, Director, Center for Governance Studies, University of Ottawa
The Federal Ras-le-bol

Work on Parliament Hill, Ottawa
Parliament Hill, Ottawa Photo: Radio-Canada

In addition, the Ottawian experience in the federal public service may partly explain concerns about the official bilingual nature of the City.

Councilor Allan Hubley believes that the language requirements for public servants would have prevented anglophones from obtaining jobs and creating tensions.

"I would not support the idea of recreating this situation," he explains.

Yet last August, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages revealed the results of a poll showing that 87% of Canadians believed that Ottawa should be recognized as an officially bilingual City.

Historian Matthew Hayday, a professor at the University of Guelph, has extensively studied the tensions associated with the use of both official languages in the country.

According to him, Anglophones are generally in favor of bilingualism "in the abstract". However, "when it comes to a question of their jobs, economic repercussions that directly affect them, it is at this moment that the opposition is mounted," he explains.

According to the Canadians for Language Fairness group, English-speaking civil servants embittered by the perception that they are unable to progress at the same pace as Francophones in the federal system are likely to suffer in silence.

Al Speyers is one of those former government employees who participate in the monthly meetings in Ottawa of the organization opposed to the Official Languages Act.

Women often speak of a glass ceiling. There is definitely a francophone cap.

Al Speyers, Former Federal Public Servant

Candidates for the Public Service must complete an examination in the other official language. "The language tests that federal public servants must pass are disproportionately more difficult in French than they are in English," says Speyer.

Thus, it would be much easier for a francophone to be considered bilingual than for an anglophone, according to him.

Such a speech is based on "impressions," according to Professor Hayday, but "who create a whole speech that bilingualism only favors francophones and not anglophones."

Responsibility of elected officials

The Mayor of Ottawa made a speech to announce upcoming events in 2017

Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson gave a speech to announce upcoming events in 2017 Photo: Radio-Canada / Roger Dubois

According to Professor Caroline Andrew, the minority of councilors who support the [#OttawaBilingue](#) project is also explained by the lack of leadership of the Mayor in this file.

Since the beginning, Jim Watson has refused to support the idea of an officially bilingual city, considering that the Municipality is already bilingual and that its settlement is sufficient.

#OttawaBilingual indicates on its website that the "Bilingualism Policy and the current by-law are generally working well since 2001". However, the group wants to "clarify them and ensure their continuity for future generations. "

The president of Canadians for Language Fairness, Kim McConnell, is extremely pleased with the mayor's refusal to give in to the pressures, having understood how "it is a very expensive idea", she said.

Paying taxes to the City of Ottawa for jobs, so that Quebeckers come to these jobs? This is unacceptable! It gets worse and it is something that makes many people very angry.

Kim McConnell, President, Canadians for Language Fairness

Professor Hayday, for his part, believes that it is the leadership of all politicians that is failing in this matter, whether at the municipal, provincial or federal level.

"The result is that we see people who are more likely to oppose bilingual policies aloud," he said.

But Beth Trudeau, one of the activists at Canadians for Language Fairness, disagrees. According to her, if the project went forward, it would create "a lot of resentment and a lot of division" in the community.

One of his colleagues in Ottawa, entrepreneur Gordon Miller, simply does not believe that this is a real issue.

“What more can we ask?” My understanding is that the only people who are dissatisfied with a lack of official bilingualism are activists, “he said.

<http://Ottawa, officially bilingual city: a broken dream?>

<http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1019536/ottawa-ville-bilingue-opposition-conseillers>

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1. News
2. Uncategorized

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