

Over the Back Fence  
For Friday January 25, 2008  
Approx 630 words

Missing signature  
By Alva Wood

Our village might not get bulletproof, self-cleaning, coin-operated, stainless steel, automated toilets after all.

Chief engineer Freddie Fallis really wanted them. He loves playing with shiny toys.

Automated toilets would also save him from sending a flunkie every month or so to clean up the pit latrines. You'd be amazed at the mess racoons can make when they get hold of one end of a roll of toilet paper. Compounded by the mess some people make when they finish their business and discover that the toilet paper is now draped over a tree somewhere else.

But he won't get his biffies because someone forgot a signature.

The day after mayor Jake Bowers got that cheque from the provincial government for upgrading Main Street, administrator Henry Hill sent out an RFT. That's a "Request For Tender" in bureauspeak.

Despite the short notice, the road construction tenders came in. One of them was even within budget. The rest were only half a million or so over budget, which wasn't bad at all, Henry reminded the Council, considering what was happening to the Vancouver Convention Centre, the Mount Boucherie Arena, and the 2010 Olympic Games.

The tendering forms had the usual spaces for authorizing signatures on the final page.

On the left side of the page, under a line that said, "Accepted on behalf of the contractor," there was a space for the contractor's signature.

The right side of the page had a matching space, for a signature from the village administration.

Freddie was just about to sign the low bid when Henry noticed that the left side of the page looked suspiciously blank.

"Whoa!" Henry says.

"Why?" asks Freddie, his pen still poised to scribble.

"Because it's not signed," says Henry.

"You're right," says Freddie, looking at the paper. He reaches for his telephone. "I'll call him and get him to drop around and sign it."

"Whoa!" says Henry.

"What is it this time?" asks Freddie, with his arm extended like a deodorant advertisement.

"You can't do that," says Henry.

"Sure I can," says Freddie. "You underestimate me, you know. I'm quite capable of making a phone call."

"We've been waiting seven years already for that cheque," explains Henry. "Are you sure you want to spend another seven years tied up in litigation, because our tendering procedures displayed favouritism towards one contractor?"

"Hunh?" says Freddie.

"We have to treat all applicants equally," Henry insists. "You can't call one contractor to come in and sign his papers unless you call all the other contractors to come in and sign their papers too."

"They don't have to," says Freddie. "They already signed."

"Precisely," says Henry. "Therefore their tenders are valid, and this one isn't."

Freddie still doesn't get it. "They aren't real signatures anyway," he says. "They all sent their tenders in electronically. So it's just a computerized facsimile inserted into the file. They didn't really forget to sign it," he says, "someone just forgot to punch a computer button."

"Yes," says Henry. "But the others remembered, and this one didn't. We'll have to disqualify this tender for insufficient documentation."

He sighs. "You just can't be too careful these days," he says.

Freddie puts his telephone back on the hook. "But the next lowest tender will cost us another half million dollars," he protests. "Where are we going to get that much extra money?"

“Freddie, Freddie, Freddie,” sighs Henry. “Haven’t you learned anything? Lesson One: roads trump everything. Lesson Two: shortfalls always come out of the Parks & Rec budget.”

As Henry left the room, he glanced back. Freddie had a roll of blueprints pressed to his face. It took Henry a second to realize that Freddie was kissing his bulletproof biffies goodbye.