

## NEWS COLUMNISTS

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# Mayor should stop being inconsistent over flag tribute to Calgary soldiers killed in the line of duty

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There's a reason the flags outside city hall remain at full-staff, flying high even as Calgarians mourn for a third day over the death of Cpl. Michael Starker, a local soldier and paramedic.

It's protocol.

At least, it's protocol as of now.

Protocol in this case means a decision made by the Mayor's Office at some point early yesterday morning, less than a day after Starker was killed in Afghanistan by a Taliban bullet.

At least, that's when City of Calgary protocol clerk Catherine Humeny says she first heard of the city's official new rule regarding municipal flags and dead Canadian soldiers.

"That was a request of the Mayor's Office, as of this morning," said Humeny.

The new protocol, not voted on by city council or vetted in a single public discussion, is that municipal flags will remain at full height until the body of the dead soldier is back in Canada.

Starker's repatriation



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ceremony, when his casket officially touches down on Canadian soil, is slated for noon Calgary time tomorrow.

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That's four days after Starker died.

From that point, until Starker's funeral is over, the flags outside old City Hall will finally join those at EMS headquarters and Calgary's military facilities and be lowered. At last.

Until then, unlike the citizens of cities like Toronto and towns like Nanton, Calgarians will see no immediate symbol of civic mourning, because of an official protocol that apparently didn't officially exist when the week started.

That's despite Mayor Dave Bronconnier telling two reporters -- whom he approached yesterday morning as they were staring up at the non-lowered flags -- that the city has always stuck to the same flag-lowering rule.

"We always follow the same protocol," Bronconnier.

An e-mail message was sent to aldermen yesterday, saying the same: The city always follows the same protocol.

Except the City of Calgary doesn't.

It's no wonder citizens are confused, and wondering if anyone at city hall is aware a soldier and paramedic is dead, and why the flags haven't shifted.

The last time Calgary suffered a similar tragedy in Afghanistan, back in 2007, Bronconnier himself stepped forward to say the existing protocol, as followed by the provincial and federal government, didn't do enough to honour the dead.

Instead of waiting for the funeral -- as per the protocol then -- Bronconnier demanded the flags at City Hall be immediately lowered out of respect for Cpl. Nathan Hornburg, less than one day after he was killed.

At the time, Bronconnier said the city would follow military tradition, lowering ensigns to fly at half-staff at the soldier's "home base."

In short, when a Calgary soldier died in the line of duty, City Hall flags would fall, too.

"This is a new protocol. I strongly believe we should support the military tradition of home base and I think it's appropriate, given this is a local Calgarian," Bronconnier said at the time.

It was a sound decision made publicly by the mayor; one that reflected the emotion of citizens.

So where's that leadership now?

Just daring to inquire about the decision to delay the flag lowering was condemned as a "distasteful question" by an unhappy member of Bronconnier's staff.

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One wonders if those working in the Mayor's Office would condemn the father of Cpl. Hornburg, who also wonders if a four-day delay is appropriate for a symbol of civic mourning.

"It's the same in any city -- the instant you hear, the grieving process begins then, not four days later," said Michael Hornburg.

"It's baffling."

Instead of the Mayor's Office making a knee-jerk, scribbled-on-a-napkin decision about flag protocol, city council should debate and pass a flag policy once and for all.

One hopes council would grasp the obvious, and understand Calgarians need an immediate symbol of grief, and a clear sign of official mourning.

That means lowering the flag right away -- not four days after tragedy strikes.

But no matter what council decides, at least there will be consistency -- unlike now.

-- with files from Shawn Logan