

TORONTO · CITY HALL

Gord Perks calls it quits: Toronto councillor looks back on 20 years at city hall and the personal tragedy that fuels his political passion

The long-time local politician's decision not to run in this year's contest leaves a vacuum on city hall's left, but may be welcome news to the councillor's critics.

Updated April 30, 2026 · 5 min read

By Ben Spurr · City Hall Bureau Chief

City hall is about to lose one of its strongest voices.

Gord Perks whose impassioned rhetoric and procedural know-how have made him an inspiration to left-leaning allies and an irritant to conservative mayors for two decades has decided not to run for re-election this fall.

The decision, which Perks confirmed to the Star in an exclusive interview, means that for the first time since 2006, after nominations for Toronto's Oct. 26 municipal election open on Friday, he won't be among those filing his papers.

His retirement will mark the departure of one of Toronto's most prominent council members, and leave a vacuum on city hall's left. It might also be welcome news to the councillor's critics, who have accused him of disregarding residents' concerns and stifling dissent on policies he supports.

"I tried to persuade him not to retire," Mayor Olivia Chow said with a laugh, revealing that she offered Perks a lighter workload to convince him to stay. A former NDP MP, the mayor said she had admired Perks since his pre-council days as an environmental activist.

"We're going to miss him," said Chow, who has yet to announce her own intentions for this year's election.

Why the long-time politician is not running

Seated in his council office, where a Socialist Worker Party poster hangs on the wall, Perks, 62, his silver hair in a boyish part, said he has always been uncomfortable with the trappings of an elected official. He has long insisted people call him Gord instead of "councillor", "because I hate it," he said.

He explained his decision not to run again was due in part to his concern that after 20 years his political persona was threatening to become too much a part of his identity.

"I got tired of talking to people about what kind of person 'Councillor Gord Perks' is," he said. "Shedding" that official image is "both something I absolutely need to do," and "also really scary."

For an unnatural politician, Perks has taken to the job in ways many of his colleagues never have. He's known for an exhaustive knowledge of council procedure and for closely reading staff reports — as well as for weaponizing that expertise for political ends.

According to former councillor Adam Vaughan, Perks knows how to stickhandle complex issues through the council system. Vaughan, who described Perks as his closest friend in politics, recalled that he used an obscure budget manoeuvre to help kill off the controversial Front Street extension early in the pair's council careers.

"He is easily one of the smartest people to ever sit on city council," Vaughan said.

How he fought Rob Ford

Perks was first elected in 2006. A close ally of then-mayor David Miller, he championed climate initiatives and the Transit City plan that led to the Finch and Eglinton LRT lines. In 2023 he was tapped by Chow to chair council's housing committee, where he has advanced a city program to purchase rental units and keep them affordable, and spearheaded Toronto's "public builder" housing model.

But perhaps fittingly for a former activist Perks famously crashed then-premier David Peterson's 1990 campaign launch to play an audio recording slamming his environmental record, when asked about his proudest moment at city hall, the first thing that Perks mentioned was his work opposing those in power.

From 2010 to 2023, Perks was the chair of the city's progressive caucus, the unofficial opposition to mayors Rob Ford and John Tory. According to Perks, two weeks after the 2010 election, he met with fellow left-leaning members Janet Davis, Shelley Carroll and Vaughan, and over "a long, long lunch" drafted a memo about "how are we going to stop (Ford's) project?"

By forging strategic alliances with centrist councillors, and co-ordinating strategy on the council floor, the group's members say they played a key role in stymying Ford's plans for a waterfront casino, citywide privatization of garbage collection and deeper cuts to public services.

After Tory was elected in 2014, Perks was as dogged a critic of the new mayor as he had been of Ford, hammering Tory over policies such as his SmartTrack transit plan. But Tory retains a respect for his former sparring partner.

"We disagreed on many things and for sure he was partisan but almost never personal," Tory said in a text, stressing that while they were on opposite sides of disputes, "at all times the motivation was to try to find the right path for the city."

A personal tragedy that fuelled his career

For longtime council watchers, Perks's career will be defined by his speeches. His February 2023 remarks on the dry subject of the annual budget elicited applause in the normally sedate chamber, as he excoriated colleagues who claimed they couldn't find more funding for housing and youth programs.

"Any time someone tells you that the wealthiest city in Canada ... 'can't' provide somewhere to live for everybody who lives here," he said, "what is actually happening is that some in this chamber 'won't.'"

Some of his most powerful speeches have referenced his sister Sharon, who died by suicide three decades ago after experiencing mental health problems and homelessness. Perks described her as an "utterly brilliant" person failed by social services that should have helped. His sense of her lost potential has motivated his career-long push for stronger supports for the vulnerable.

"Our society at its deepest level is organized to make the wealthy wealthier. It's not organized to make it possible for everyone to live their best life," he said. "It just hurts, seeing people who can't live their best life."

Criticism of Perks mounts

There have been times when Perks's passion has gotten the better of him. In 2012, he looked close to coming to blows with councillor Giorgio Mammoliti in the council chamber, after Perks took exception to him criticizing city staff. Perks soon apologized.

And to critics, his high-minded rhetoric can come off as self-righteous, his adherence to procedure pedantic. Last July, residents who showed up to the housing committee to object to new homeless shelters were livid when he tried to restrict discussion to the technical zoning changes before the committee, rather than the shelters themselves. Perks's ruling may have been technically correct, but Coun. Brad Bradford (Beaches—East York) accused him of trying to shut down debate using "legalese."

There are also signs that constituents in Parkdale-High Park are ready for a change. In the last election in 2022, Perks won with only about 36 per cent of the vote, down from 55 per cent in 2014.

The councillor's relationship with constituents is "mixed, that's for sure," said Greg Homonylo, who lives in the ward. Homonylo and others have been advocating against the city's handling of environmental issues pertaining to the redevelopment of the Swansea Mews community housing complex, and allege that Perks isn't listening to their concerns. The councillor has "lost touch," and residents feel "betrayed," Homonylo said.

No apologies for taking a stand

Perks acknowledged that in the last election he felt “a change in how I related to the people I represent.” He attributed it in part to politics becoming more toxic after COVID-19, and Premier Doug Ford’s 2018 decision to double the size of each council ward. Perks now represents more than 100,000 constituents instead of about 56,000, making it harder to connect.

“A lot of ways that I was engaging with the community, I just had to cut out,” Perks said.

But the councillor, who has argued residents have no more right to prevent a homelessness shelter in their community than they do to bar residents on racial grounds, makes no apologies for advocating for policies he believes in, even if it alienates constituents.

“I think a candidate’s job is to say this is who I am, this is what I believe, and leave it up to voters to decide whether that’s how they want to be represented,” he said.

The open race to succeed Perks is likely to be hotly contested. Homelessness advocate Diana Chan McNally is among those rumoured to be considering a run (Chan McNally declined to comment).

Perks said he doesn’t know what he’ll do this fall once the term is up and he sheds his council identity. But he knows what he won’t be doing.

“I have a secret pact with another member of council that if either of us becomes a lobbyist, the other is allowed to assassinate them,” he said.

Clarification — April 30, 2026

This article has been updated to clarify that ward resident Greg Homonylo, and others have been advocating against the city’s handling of the redevelopment of the Swansea Mews community housing complex — not the redevelopment itself, as previously stated.

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