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Council rejects motion to reduce size from eight to six

By Brock Weir

If you were one of the nearly 8,100 residents who voted last fall to reduce the size of Council from eight members, plus the Mayor, to six, you're likely out of luck.

Council is set to reject the idea this week following extensive discussions at the Committee level last Tuesday.

The proposal to reduce Aurora's Council complement from the current eight members to six was one of two referendum questions on last year's municipal election ballot. Although the majority of those participating in the election voted in favour of the reduction (8,060 votes in favour to 4,427), too many eligible voters stayed home, rendering the decision non-binding on Council.

Although this threshold wasn't met, Councillor Paul Pirri, who moved in the last term to have these questions included on the ballot, said the majority still spoke.

?I do think [with] the votes cast in that direction we do have a very strong indication of what the residents in our community want to see as the composition of Council,? said Councillor Paul Pirri. ?As a two-time eighth place finisher in the elections here in Aurora, it is not about what I think works best for me, but what I think works well for our residents. Ultimately, I think the residents have the right to choose how they are represented, and they spoke very clearly about how they are represented, in my view.?

Ultimately, however, Councillor Pirri was the lone vote where it counted.

Speaking against the motion, Mayor Geoff Dawe and the other six Councillor in attendance at the meeting cited a number of concerns about proceeding with the reduction, ranging from not meeting that all-important threshold, to questioning why residents voted the way they did.

While he conceded the majority of those turning up at the polls voted in favour of the reduction, a reduction itself would be ?short sighted?, according to Councillor Harold Kim. Consultant studies have shown municipalities of more than 50,000 are best served by a system of Mayor and eight Councillors, he said.
?I submit the public needs to focus not so much on the cost of elected officials, but the quality of elected officials,? said Councillor Kim. ?I think people need to do their homework and know who they are voting for, and not the price or cost. I suspect when people were contemplating that question, they were recognizing the immediate cost savings, or lack of knowledge for the amount of work that goes into being a member of Council.?
Crunching the numbers, Councillor Kim added the total cost of Council is $5.02 per year per Aurora resident, and he said he believed residents were getting ?value for the eight people.?

?The more resources you put into your Town and Council, the better performance and better quality of life you're going to have,? he said.
A similar argument was made by Councillor Jeff Thom. Councillors have ?no indication? why residents voted the way they did, although a perceived cost savings would be the ?most logical explanation?, he said.

?It is hard to get into what the mind of the electorate was, and maybe that is the fault of the question itself,? he offered. ?The results should definitely be taken into consideration, but 64 per cent of 32 per cent of the eligible electorate voted for it. In the grand scheme of things, the majority of voters didn't. That's semantics, but I am sticking with it.?

Serving as a Councillor in Aurora is a part-time job, he added, and there was no indication of making Councillors full time if composition was ultimately reduced. This, he said, would not serve as an incentive for people running for Council outside of public service.

?We're not changing the pay, we're not changing the amount of hours the Councillor is expected to work, and most Councillors do hold other jobs. How are you going to attract young people who have families, who would already find it difficult to sit on Council with more work? It pushes away people we want to bring into the electoral system.?

As one Councillor who has been a long-time proponent of discussing whether or not Aurora's Councillors should be full time, Wendy Gaertner concurred. In the lead-up to the election, there wasn't enough education for residents to fully consider the question.

?I think all new Councillors, including myself, are shocked by the amount of work that needs to be done if you want to do the job well,? she said.
Speaking against the motion, Mayor Geoff Dawe said he believed Council needs to ?differentiate? between cost and value, something they don't do quite enough.

?I am, quite frankly, ambivalent as to whether or not we drop two because I don't think that is the real issue,? he said. ?I believe [the real issue is how do we attract quality people and make sure we're making quality decisions at this table? I think that is a far more important discussion to have.?

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: ?I see a reduction in the number of Councillors as arguably a reduction in the service we would provide to the community. It is a reduction in access. I am also not in favour of the reduction.?

In the end, however, although his motion was unsuccessful, Councillor Pirri insisted it was the right way forward.

?We can sit around the table and try to rationalize the decisions of the public,? he said. ?They can say it was because they wanted to save money, or they did it for this reason, but I think that ultimately does a huge disservice to our residents. We asked them a question, they responded to the question. If we want to reject their response to the question based on us not meeting the threshold, I think that is a perfectly fine reason to do so.

?But when we start questioning why somebody might have done something, ultimately they made a choice?and we shouldn't be questioning the rationale behind that choice.?