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Internet voting met with skepticism at Council

By Brock Weir

Those hoping for Aurora to adopt internet voting in time for next year's municipal election will likely be left disappointed this week as Council prepares to vote down a shift away from the traditional paper ballot.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, nixed a recommendation from Town Staff to implement a new method of online voting which would allow residents to log into a secure website from anywhere connected to the internet to cast their choices for Mayor and Council.

?We are talking about fundamentally changing our voting system,? said Councillor Jeff Thom, one of the primary voices in opposition to the recommendation at last week's meeting. ?There really isn't any issue at all with our current system. The Federal Government still uses paper ballots, the Provincial government still uses paper ballots, and they try to make it as accessible as possible. Change for the sake of change is a mistake.?

Among his chief concerns was security, citing test runs of internet voting systems in the states over six years ago which showed how a system could be hacked.

These concerns, however, were not shared by Michael de Rond, Aurora's newly-minted Clerk, who presented the case for change with Deputy Clerk Samantha Yew.

?The main challenge is security and when staff think of security we think of it in two ways: the first instance of security is the voting system and basically can it be hacked. I can't stand here and say definitively that it cannot be, but I can say there are no instances of an electronic voting system being tampered with by malicious third parties in Ontario municipal elections,? said Mr. de Rond.

In an electronic voting system, such as the one proposed, security audits are taken every day to make sure the system is in good working order and there are no outside influences.

The second way they consider security is security for the voter, such as a hypothetical where someone steals mail containing the PIN numbers of individual voters and using them to rig the vote.

?It is important to remember that if someone were to theoretically steal the mail and vote with all the pins they would be breaking five federal laws in the Criminal Code of Canada,? the Clerk noted.

Internet voting has seen a surge in recent years. Just 47 of Ontario's 444 municipalities used internet voting in some form by the time of the 2010 municipal elections. By the next election in 2014, this number had more than doubled to 97 municipalities. Ms. Yew said the numbers were on track to see this hit 200 by 2018, with Newmarket recently adopting an internet voting system.

These trends, however, were not enough to convince the majority of Council.

?I was all for electronic voting because everything seems to be electronic,? said Councillor Harold Kim. ?I don't like flying but we all know flying is one of the safest methods of transportation but I still get uneasy every time I get on a plane because when something happens it is usually pretty bad!

?I thought online voting would really be a substantive savings but the figures don't seem to indicate that. There do not seem to be any overall benefits, there do not seem to be any other than convenience for those who plan to vote anyway. Whether you vote online or actually make a physical effort to vote, those who really want to vote and want to be engaged in the voting process will do whatever it takes to actually vote. I know this is the way of the future but I just need time to get that massaged into my head and get used to it. It doesn't mean that one week can't change my mind on this.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner offered a similar view, adding she was not yet convinced of the benefits.

?It is always nice to be ahead of the curve but the way I am feeling at the moment I would rather be on the curve or behind the curve for something like this,? she said. ?The way I am thinking about this now is there is just too much room for error.?

Councillors John Abel and Michael Thompson also voiced their concerns, primarily related to security and the implementation of the system.

But, for supporters of the shift towards internet voting, the time was simply right.

?I am all in favour of this,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas, adding he believed it would engage younger people in Aurora as well. ?I think it is the way to go. We tout ourselves as being progressive and being accessible, and looking at all these aspects, I just think moving forward it just needs to be done. I am comfortable in hearing what different municipalities and what's out there have done. I think there are flaws in the system right now. Does that mean we're going to stop doing it this way and we have to look at ways of changing it? We are constantly looking at what is the best way to have our elections.

?I just think this is the way to move forward and it's time. I just happened to be at a nomination and watched busloads of people

come in and being told what to vote and who to vote for. How do you fix that? There is a risk in everything we do. Just because there is a risk doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.?

Mayor Geoff Dawe was also a firm supporter of internet voting.

?I am not sure it is appropriate to bring up concerns from 2010 in terms of electronic security because it has grown by leaps and bounds every six months,? he said. ?The security today is much more robust than it was even two years ago, so I don't think that is even a concern, quite frankly. I don't think we are, frankly, very different from Markham and Newmarket [who have approved similar systems]. I am in favour because I think it is time to do it.?

Council will make its final decision on what voting method will be used in 2018 this week.