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Internet voting pilot deemed ?successful? but doesn?t translate into high vote

By Brock Weir

Despite impressive numbers of Aurorans casting their votes online this year in advance polls, voter turnout was down by over three per cent compared to the last municipal election in 2014.

As reported in last week's edition of The Auroran, voter turnout in the 2018 Municipal Election was 32.1 per cent of eligible voters compared to 35.7 per cent in 2014.

This dip in voter turnout came as a surprise to Mike de Rond, Town Clerk for the Town of Aurora, whose department oversees the election process.

?We're surprised with the turnout overall,? he says. ?I don't know if it is necessarily surprising that the internet didn't increase it ? the jury is still out ? but it seems across Ontario, even in other jurisdictions across the world who use internet voting ? there is no real evidence to show that it does increase turnout. You hear anecdotally from other municipalities that sometimes it does increase turnout, so I don't know if we were expecting it to, but to be down about three and a half per cent from 2014 is surprising for us. We're looking at that percentage across the board ? York Region and GTA ? and it makes our 32.1 per cent seem not that bad.?

While voter turnout didn't increase, Mr. de Rond says internet voting in and of itself was a success, with 4,226 votes cast online, far more than his department anticipated.

?It was basically twice as many votes as we were expecting,? he says. ?The comments we heard were certainly you always have people who firmly believe that voting is done with a paper ballot at a location, so we were expecting that, we know that was coming, but all other comments we received were positive. We didn't have anyone who used internet voting who said they didn't like it.?

In total, whether it was an online or paper ballot, just seven municipal ballots were declined at the polls.

So, what can be done to increase voter turnout the next time around? That's the question of the day.

?I tend to think voter turnout, either clerks take too much credit when it is good and then they get blamed too much when it is bad,? says Mr. de Rond. ?I tend to think there are many factors. It is something we're going to look into. As part of our debrief with Council and leading into 2022, if there is anything we can do that other municipalities are doing that we can learn from and do to increase turnout.?

Nevertheless, 19,552 Aurora voters did cast their ballot on October 22.

The reasons what brought them out to the polls ? or, indeed, kept them at home ? are numerous and unknown, but a few voters did share their opinions at exit interviews conducted outside polling stations at Devins Drive Public School on Aurora's west side and at Rick Hansen Public School in the east.

Few individuals who shared their opinion volunteered who ultimately got their vote, but they were candid in the issues that ultimately brought them out.

?The environment is important for both of us, picking people who we thought would be thoughtful about environmental issues,? said Harold, who stopped with Andrea. ?One of the things that always strikes us is traffic congestion, especially around Wellington Street. Outside of that, we wanted to find a balance between quality of life and being accessible to the services that may be developed.?

Added Andrea: ?Keeping up with demand [is an issue]. Aurora is growing like crazy, but we still like the small-town feel. We realise that it is developing as we should, but we need to make sure services meet demand.?

Tanya shared concerns about traffic and said she was looking for ?change, first of all, and some new faces on Council.?

?I was looking for people who were willing to listen to the community and what was important to the community in terms of traffic, road congestion and that kind of thing,? she said. ?Traffic [is one of the most important issues of the next four years] given the amount of growth in Aurora, and mental health is also a big thing for me, especially in schools.?

Scott, however, was open that his choice was for incumbent Geoff Dawe, who he said did a ?solid job guiding the community? and praised his ?steady hand on Council? when compared to the 2006 ? 2010 Council term.

His biggest issues, he said were recreational facilities, the environment, and ?proper development.?

?I think our biggest issues in the next four years are going to be growth and how we plan the Town to welcome new people and have the infrastructure to support that, along with revitalizing the downtown core and supporting the arts. We have heard there are plans to build a theatre in the downtown core [as part of the Library Square redevelopment] and we're big supporters of that.?