

Council to forge ahead with electoral, ward review

By Brock Weir

Council is set to forge ahead with a review process that could lead to the implementation of a ward system of government.

Local lawmakers went into this week's General Committee meeting facing a recommendation from staff to put an electoral system review on the back burner pending the Province's ongoing review of Regional Government.

Council, however, had other ideas and voted Tuesday night at Committee to get the ball rolling, a decision expected to be ratified at the Council table in the coming week.

Earlier this week, lawmakers reviewed a recommendation calling for a Town-wide study of the Aurora's electoral system, but staff recommend their approval be contingent on the Regional Governance Review leaving Aurora's boundaries unchanged.

Following his election last year, Mayor Tom Mrakas made adopting a ward system ? where Councillors are elected to represent specific segments of Town ? a top priority, but Aurora's Governance Review Ad Hoc Committee has recommended that a wholesale review of the electoral system not go forward until Ontario completes its review of Regional Government.

?The Provincial Government is currently undertaking a Regional Government Review, which aims at making recommendations to improve service delivery in parts of Ontario,? said Town Clerk Mike de Rond in his report. ?At this point, few details have emerged as to what changes could be coming to municipal boundaries, if any at all. It has been rumoured that the Government intends to release their findings in the late spring or over the summer; however, this is not confirmed. At their meeting on April 1, the Governance Review Ad Hoc Committee agreed unanimously that the Town's review should not proceed until the Town has confirmation that the Town of Aurora's boundaries will not be changing [under the review].?

Nevertheless, Mr. de Rond notes that electoral system reviews, such as the one being proposed here, are ?uncommon? projects for municipalities and usually only occur every eight to twelve years.

Electoral system reviews are more ?involved? than a regular ward boundary review, he continues.

If hired, the consultant hired by the Town to carry out the review will be required to do an in-depth analysis of Aurora ?to determine appropriate ward options? for the community; the aim being any changes stemming from the review being firmed up in time for the 2022 Municipal Election.

?A review of the Town's electoral system is warranted and largely driven by population growth,? says Mr. de Rond. ?According to Census data, the population of Aurora in 2016 was 55,455. As stated in the population statistics in York Region's annual Growth and Development Report, the Town continues to be one of the fastest-growing municipalities in the Region with a 2.5 per cent increase in population between 2014 and 2015, 4.2 per cent increase between 2015 and 2016, and 5.7 per cent increase between 2016 and 2017. The Town's Official Plan (OP) growth forecasts estimate the Town's

population to increase to 68,100 before the next Municipal Election, and 70,200 by 2031.

?All municipalities in Ontario with a population greater than 50,000, with the exception of North Bay, have adopted a ward system for electing their Councils. With the City of Oshawa moving back to a ward system before the last election, the Town of Aurora is now the largest municipality in Ontario to elect their representatives using the at-large system. This is not to say that Aurora must make the change to the ward system, as North Bay also uses an at-large system and has just 4,000 less residents than Aurora, but looking at whether the at-large system is still best for Aurora warrants a review.?

According to the report, electoral system reviews usually follow guidelines set out by the Supreme Court of Canada in their Carter Decision, set in 1991, which stems from a Saskatchewan case that established the right to ?effective representation.?

?The main tenet of the Carter decision is effective representation rather than absolute voter parity,? Mr. de Rond explains. ?When defining effective representation as the right protected by the Charter, the Court noted that the relative parity of voting power was a prime, but not an exclusive, condition of effective representation. It found that deviations could be justified where the consideration of other factors, such as geography, community history, community interests and minority representation would result in a legislative body that was more representative of Canada's diversity. According to the Court, considering all these factors provides effective representation.

?The principle of representation by population is founded on the premise that each person is entitled to one vote and that all votes should carry the same weight. Accordingly, in support of this principle, it is expected that each elected representative should generally represent the same number of constituents. This principle, in a ward system, is tied closely to the principle of effective representation, as any deviation from voting parity would dilute an individual's right to effective representation.

?As noted in the Carter decision, the recognition and protection of communities of interest may justifiably override the principle of voter parity where the inclusion of a community interest will lead to a system that is more representative of the Town's diversity. The Court did not define what constitutes a community of interest; however, it has been leveraged in Ontario Municipal Board appeals to recognize historical settlement patterns or existing communities and to represent social, historical, economic, religious, linguistic or political groups.?

Aurora voters were last asked whether the Town should adopt a ward system in 2014.

The results of the ballot came down 54.75 per cent in

favour of keeping the present at large system.