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Ward review won?t wait for Province

By Brock Weir

Public consultations on adopting a ward system in Aurora won't wait for the Province, according to Council.

Local lawmakers are expected to turn down a recommendation from the Town's Governance Ad-Hoc Committee this week recommending the Town hit the breaks on beginning a public consultation process that could lead to adopting a ward system of government adopting a ward system.

As reported by The Auroran last week, Council members went into last week's General Committee meeting facing a recommendation from the Governance group to put an electoral review of local government on the backburner pending the Province's Regional review that could result in significant electoral changes across Ontario.

But Council had other ideas. Sitting at the Committee level last Tuesday, the members voted to forge ahead and are poised to ratify their decision this week.

?I think it is important for us to have the committee begin work on this right away, work with the consultant and bring it back to Council for us to make a decision,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas, calling on his fellow Council members to forge ahead in approving an electoral review at the municipal level. ?The review that the Province is doing, for all intents and purposes, is not going to change any boundaries and there is going to be no amalgamation.?

To underscore his point, Mayor Mrakas said he had recently met with Newmarket-Aurora MPP Christine Elliott, questioning ?Will there be an Aurora next year?? Mayor Mrakas said she appeared taken aback at the question, asking him why that would be a thought. Pressed further, Mayor Mrakas said Ms. Elliott's response to whether amalgamation was in the cards for Aurora was an ?absolutely not,? providing assurances that was not part of the Province's review.

?I am confident from hearing that from the Minister,? Mayor Mrakas continued. ?I am confident moving forward with this. I think it is important for us to get moving on this so we can meet timelines. There are timelines [we have to meet ahead of the 2022 municipal election] and I would prefer that we do it sooner rather than later.?

This view was supported by the majority of Council, with Councillor Sandra Humfryes stating that while she appreciated all the work the Governance Ad-Hoc Committee had done in making their recommendations to Council, it was important to move forward to meet deadlines.

?Three or four years pass by very quickly,? she said.
?There is a lot of work that needs to be done and I really want to see this move forward. I also don't want to wait for the Province to do anything because lately I am not too pleased with some of the things that are going on, so I think we need to move forward with our own business and go from there.?

While Councillor Harold Kim said he was in ?total agreement? with moving forward on an Aurora-level electoral review, he questioned why this issue was being moved forward despite the public voting in favour of keeping Aurora's present at-large voting system ? that is, a system where six Council members are elected by the Town as a whole to represent the community as a whole, rather than one Council member per neighbourhood ? when it was put to a public vote in 2014.

?One of the things we looked at with this report is Aurora is the biggest community in Ontario that uses the at-large system to elect their representatives,? said Town Clerk Mike de Rond. ?It warrants a look. All options will be on the table. We have heard from people who would like to see at least options for a ward system; it will give the public what that might look like, different configurations. It is worth a study at the moment and then we can go from there.?

While Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was not in favour of adopting a ward system, she conceded the review was warranted.

?I think we need to explore the possibilities,? she said.

Also speaking in favour of moving ahead with the review was Councillor Michael Thompson.

He said he appreciated the Committee's input and concern ?about not wasting taxpayers' dollars should the boundaries be changed,? but it was important to keep momentum going.

?I have had conversations with our CAO that if the Town of Aurora's boundaries changed, it would impact our organization on all levels,? he said. ?Yet, as we went through the Budget process, we proceeded as if it was business as usual and I would suggest that is the same [here]: we continue to move forward and take care of the business needs of today. Any changes to the boundaries, any talk of anything significant such as amalgamation, would have a significant impact. All departments would be affected, yet we still carry on. I see this no differently.

?When we first approached this last term and had conversations, our clerk was clear to us that this would take a significant amount of time and we didn't have enough time last term to do it because whatever needs to be done needs to be in place the year before the elections by December 31. While we have two and a half years to go through this process, I think it is going to take a considerable amount of time to engage the public,

bring on the consultant, have conversations about what is the best system of representation and if it is wards, what the boundaries look like. I can see it going back and forth for a fair bit of time and I would rather provide more time to the community to weigh in on this than to kind of shrink those timelines and run into challenges along the road.?