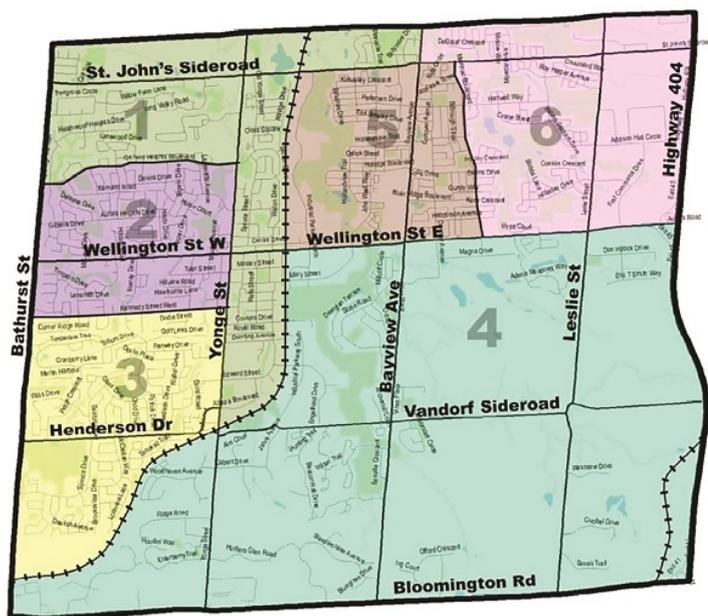


Council moves forward on Six Ward system



A six-ward electoral system will be in place by the time Aurora residents go to the municipal polls in 2022.

On Tuesday night, Council ratified its decision to implement wards on a vote of 4 - 3.

Aurora's present at-large electoral system, whereby eligible voters select one mayor and up to six councillors to represent the Town as a whole, will be set aside in 2022. In its place, a new model will be adopted where the mayor will represent the whole community while each Councillor will be elected by certain neighbourhoods to represent their interests at the table.

A six-ward model was moved forward to Council at the on a 4 ? 3 vote at the June 16 General Committee meeting, with Councillors Wendy Gaertner, John Gallo and Rachel Gilliland expressing misgivings that such a move doesn't yet have a buy-in from the community.

?'I am not confident I have the pulse of the community one way or another,?' said Councillor Gallo at the Committee level, citing feedback he has received from the community.

His preference, he said, would be to put the recommendations stemming from the Town's Electoral System Review (ESR) on the backburner to explore further options on community engagement, including the possibility of another community-wide referendum on the model.

?'I just want a better gauge of the public and I don't have that,?' he continued. ?'I feel like we're kind of skipping a step. I don't think I am abdicating my responsibilities ? I was elected to make decisions on behalf of everyone ? but this is one of those big ones that public engagement would be vital and I simply don't have that.?'

Despite assurances from consultants tasked with carrying out the ESR that the level of engagement within Aurora had been far higher than

other municipalities that have gone down this road, similar concerns were offered by Councillor Gaertner.

She suggested Council make a decision on its preferred model for a ward system and then put the final decision to the public in the form of a referendum, which Town Clerk Michael de Rond said would take approximately a year to get off the ground and could be held in a style similar to a byelection.

Previously a proponent of Aurora adopting a ward system, Councillor Gilliland said she was hesitating on a final decision as she's not sure of the overall feeling amongst the public.

'If I were to pick something, I do like the six-ward system that is being presented to us; I just don't know if that is 100 per cent what the public is wanting to do going forward because that wasn't really the question that was presented to the public,' she said. 'I would still like to digest what we have been presented and what the public thinks.'

'We are elected officials making decisions [for the public], that we feel is best for the community, so we can serve our constituents in the most effective manner,' she continued, adding that her colleagues had made some good points from the 'pro' camp. 'There are a lot of great points on either side of the table here [but] I was taken aback by the go-ahead today when we got this report. I thought we would have a little more time to absorb what was going on and [get] some of the public comments that were around and whether or not we needed to further discuss some of things that were addressed [in the ESR].'

First to give their own thumbs-up to giving the six-ward system the go-ahead was Councillor Michael Thompson who made a motion that the proposed model be adopted for the next election.

In putting his motion forward, Councillor Thompson said local consultation had been 'expansive' but conceded there isn't one 'definitive' system out there.

'There are benefits on both sides and I think our community would also, probably similar to previous times, be relatively split on the value of either one or the other' however, when I was elected in 2010, I certainly believed in the at-large system and over the past 10 years I have had many opportunities to either talk to other colleagues in other municipalities about their system of governance, [learn] more about wards, learn how representation works there'and I felt comfortable with [their] responses.

'For myself, I truly believe that given the fact that we're 60,000+ (in population), I think we're either the largest or second-largest municipality by population to still have at-large, I think as changing demographics continue to unfold in Aurora and we continue to grow, the best way to represent all Aurorans going forward is in a ward system ' then you

will truly have a more diverse and representational Council in the years to come.?

Councillor Sandra Humfries offered a similar viewpoint, stating a ward system would bring a number of benefits to Council and community alike.

?I have heard both sides from a residential perspective,? she shared. ?Some residents think it is great because you have an accountable individual. Others want to pick the best Councillor they want to work with. Some are afraid they might not have a Councillor who would support their area as well as another?but what I am finding is?there are six of us, the Mayor, we get emails and all of us are basically doing the same thing. Maybe that is a good thing, maybe it is not?but every area has a little bit of a different intricacy than others. You become more of a specialist in your area while you're still considering the overall facilities for our residents to enjoy. I think there is a real opportunity here to take full ownership of issues and really run with them and give them the attention it deserves.

?Demographics have changed so much since 2010 and I really believe this is the right way to go. I think when a resident has their Councillor and they're accountable to them, they have a stronger connection or understanding of who is going to help them through an issue or a concern and I think that is a pretty big deal. I really do.?

Councillor Harold Kim said he too was in favour of adopting the ward model in the interests of finding efficiencies.

?I think the answer [from the public] is almost always predictable because, in general, people believe if it ain't broke, don't fix it,? he said. ?Having a ward system contributes to that theme of [finding efficiencies]. I think with having a ward system, you do have that specialist who understands their area. For me, it is really the efficiency aspect. We know there is an accountable person.?

Added Mayor Mrakas: ?We always want to engage the public. I think from a public perspective, we have engaged them. We have done everything that is required and we have actually gone above and beyond that, I believe. The public has seen the map, the map hasn't changed since the last time. For me, I think this provides an efficient, more accountable government to the residents of our community, allows our community to have the best possible representation sitting at this table. The most diverse representation, I believe, will occur in moving to this system and I think it is time.?

By Brock Weir