

Council forges ahead with adopting ward system while some push for more public input

When Aurorans were last asked whether they wanted the Town to adopt a Ward System on Council in a referendum held in 2014 alongside that year's municipal election, just over 12,000 eligible voters answered the call.

Then, 55 per cent of the voters who took the time to answer the question voted against a ward system, with 45 per cent voting in favour.

Last Tuesday, when it became time for Council to make a final decision on adopting a Six-Ward system, the results were flipped but almost equally split with 57 per cent of Council voting to forge ahead and 43 per cent arguing the matter be put on the backburner pending further consultation.

Here's how each Council member made their case.

MAYOR TOM MRAKAS (Yea)

Adopting a ward system was a question of delivering on an election promise for Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Council, he said, has been discussing moving to a ward system for several years and noted that when the 2014 ? 2018 Council voted to reduce the size of Council from eight members to six in time for the 2018 election, it was pitched as the first step on the road to delivering a ward system.

?We voted in favour of that, knowing that we're going to go forward with looking at becoming wards,? he said, adding that it was agreed to let the next Council take the next steps on that road. ?We have openly discussed ward systems since that 2014 referendum. I said many times I am in favour of it. I believe the public needs to be involved. They have a right to know what each one of us, as elected officials, what our stance is and during the 2018 election, that is why I openly ran on the promise of bringing wards to Council?and to implement it by 2022. I have kept that promise and I have kept that promise to bring Council [to] make a decision, and that's what we're doing here tonight.?

As Aurora grows, it is incumbent on Council to look at the best form of representation for the whole Town and adopting a ward system would not only increase engagement, but open the electoral process to a ?more diverse? field of candidates, he argued.

?[Knocking on doors during election time], how many times have we heard it is impossible or very hard to get to every single household in

Town?? he concluded. ?How can you engage everybody? [You do so] by moving to a ward system and we work together as a team to make decisions. For me, it is time Council does what we were elected to do.?

COUNCILLOR HAROLD KIM (Yea)

In supporting a move towards a ward system, Councillor Kim said replacing the current at-large system for the new model will increase efficiency and help Council focus.

?On the at-large system which I served in the last six-plus years?there's a lot of duplication of efforts,? he said. ?It's kind of like you're watching a duck smoothly swimming across a pond, but underneath you're seeing the duck just frantically pedalling away. That is what you see when you have residents emailing all of us and asking us about an item and all of us are trying to solve a problem when you might only need one Councillor.

?Residents have a view that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And why not? You only see the surface level of what is going on. But underneath, us Councillors and staff, the efficiency is there, the productivity is not there, and those are the reasons I am in favour of a ward system.

?When you look back at 2014, you had 28 candidates. It is pretty daunting as a new entrant to compete in an elective process with 28 other candidates. In a ward system, there are two or three people [and] you can focus on the issues and its benefits [to] the residents of that ward. There is less barrier to entry to new candidates and I think that is great in a democratic system.

COUNCILLOR SANDRA HUMFRYES (Yea)

Councillor Humfryes also cited efficiencies in her arguments in favour of adopting a ward system.

It was about ?accountability and responsibility? first, she said.

?One of the things that happened throughout the week, there were a couple of residential issues that came up,? she said, on the intervening seven days between the last General Committee meeting and the final Council meeting of June. ?It's as simple as a [leash free dog park going behind a residential area] and what it turned out to be was the ratepayers didn't have an opportunity to communicate to everyone so they didn't get that feedback. That was going full steam ahead here and we could have stopped a bunch of work the staff have done, a ton of design work and money spent, and luckily that didn't go through to the last phase.

?All of the residents said if we had a Ward Councillor who would know what these smaller issues are going on in their neighbourhoods?The bigger items, the facilities, everything that goes on, we're

all accountable to that and we're accountable to every area, not just your area?but in your area you are going to become the subject matter expert of your area and you can have a more focused view of the area.?

COUNCILLOR MICHAEL THOMPSON (Yea)

While each system of government presently in place in Ontario has its own pros and cons, Councillor Michael Thompson said a ward system was best suited for Aurora.

?I recognize that no one system is better than the other

[and]

that when you put them in context with your community you can see [the benefits] and I truly believe at this time, with our size of population, with the various demographics within Aurora, that the better system of representation going forward is a ward system.

?During the election time, it was a front and centre issue. Everyone on Council was quoted in the paper on their perspective on wards. I believe at that time five of the seven people in front of us said they were pro wards and it certainly was an issue in front of the public for at least the last three years. I definitely take into consideration the vote as well as the ongoing conversations I have had over the last three years. As I have said many times, I think it is the best way forward for the Town of Aurora.

COUNCILLOR WENDY GAERTNER (Nay)

In stating her case against adopting a ward system at this time, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was in favour of the Six-Ward model presented by consultants in principle, but instead wanted this model presented to the public in a referendum during the 2022 Municipal Election.

?I support the option, but I don't support [taking it] to the next level,? she contended. ?In [our engagement policy], anything that is going to affect the Town as a whole is supposed to come through a referendum and, as I said in the past, referendums are tricky. To get a decision that the majority of people want has seemed to be elusive, but, as we have that policy in place, I think we should be following it.?

COUNCILLOR JOHN GALLO (Nay)

Councillor Gallo offered a similar view, stating he didn't think Council should be moving forward with a ward system until another referendum could be held.

'For me, it is not a question of whether or not I want a ward system. I have actually hopped both ways at various times, but I can tell you in my seven or eight years' experience on Council, I have never once, and I don't think I am exaggerating, out of thousands of correspondence with residents, have I ever heard a complaint saying, 'You know what, John? I send emails to everyone and it really bothers me that I get responses from everyone.'

I won't disagree that it may not be the most efficient and I agree with my colleagues that having all of us respond may not be the most efficient way of doing business, but I do see some value to that. The system has worked forever. To me, it is one of those issues that affects the entire community. We went once out to the public and asked their opinion. Sure, it wasn't an overwhelming 'no', but the majority of who did vote, albeit a small percentage of the public, didn't want it.

Certainly on very big issues that affect everyone I think it is incumbent upon us to reach out to the residents. I am in favour of doing that prior to making this decision. We may end up in the same place and I would be in favour of sending this back to staff and asking them, 'How do we implement a midterm referendum' in order to gauge the community?'

COUNCILLOR RACHEL GILLILAND (Nay)

Previously a proponent of a ward system, Councillor Gilliland said the options provided by consultants as part of the Town's Electoral System Review (ESR) were educational, but more information on overall community support for the Six-Ward model was warranted.

I am the new Councillor on the block and the only experience I have is [in an] at-large, so this was a really great exercise,' she said. 'There are lots of pros and cons for wards and at large. Part of becoming a Councillor, I thought it must make sense to have wards and [explore it] at a population level. We all know who to contact, someone responsible for that area and there would be a lot more accountability. What I also learned through this process and reaching out, there are also some things that are cons. It could be that it is divisive, or it could cause negotiations on what issues are important to your ward or somebody else's. It could actually bog things down and cause reconsiderations and actually slow the process.'

This is kind of the first time we've been able to see what those options are and the real question is: is it the right thing for Aurora to do and do residents agree? This report that has been presented is a really great education piece on ward systems and what they would look like, and it outlines the pros and cons and all the different models for us to consider at this point. However, this is the first time residents and Councillors have had the opportunity to examine the options since the Town voted no on the 2014 ballot. This is a very big decision and I fundamentally believe this decision should be something the residents should have the opportunity to voice upon now that we have this education piece. Residents can actually learn from it. I will respect this Council's decision wherever the chips may fall. I would rather receive this [recommendation] for information and the ESR be referred back to staff [to] help us determine community support on the Six-Ward option or no wards.'

By Brock Weir