

Time for Aurora to adopt ward system, says Council

By Brock Weir

Aurora is set to begin the process of looking at a ward system of government.

Last week, Council voted to begin the process of hiring a consultant to carry out a study on how Aurora might adopt a ward system of government whereby each Council member would be elected to represent the interests of a specific neighbourhood. Aurora currently employs an 'at large' system of government where each Council member serves the Town as a whole.

Council's decision to hire a consultant to begin a public consultation process came in the face of recommendations from staff and the Town's Governance Ad Hoc Committee suggesting the process be put on the backburner pending the Province of Ontario's review of Regional Governance.

The motion to forge ahead came on the heels of a similar decision made at the previous week's General Committee meeting and was made by Councillor Michael Thompson, who suggested an amendment to take things one step further.

'Council needs to send a clear and concise message that we're more than just interested in exploring the possibility of changing our electoral system; that the general view is that we believe it is time to switch from a Town-wide perspective to a ward vote,' said Councillor Thompson. 'While this doesn't bind us because it is just in principle, it shows to the Governance Committee and the Consultant that it is the serious intention of this Council to switch our system of government.'

Councillor Thompson conceded there has been significant discussion in the community 'and the Council table' whether a ward system, if adopted, would be a full ward system, or a hybrid of wards and Aurora's current model, or indeed to maintain the status quo.

'I think it is important for those who are vehemently opposed to the ward system' to speak now and show their thoughts or preferences towards the system; otherwise, we should continue forward,' he said.

First to speak in favour of Councillor Thompson's amendment was Councillor Harold Kim. While he acknowledged the work of the Governance committee, he said that over the last four-and-a-half years he has seen public sentiments change towards a ward system.

When the question on whether to adopt a ward system was put to local voters in the 2014 Municipal Election, with nearly 55 per cent of voters sending a message in favour of the status quo, Councillor Kim said there's change in the air.

?I have experienced people, Councillors, say one thing in previous years and say something else in subsequent years and I think we need to hold ourselves accountable on where we're at and where we're positioned,? said Councillor Kim. ?This is a way of solidifying that we are committed.?

Moving forward was also ?the right thing to do? from the perspective of Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said this will begin the process of gathering more information and public input.

?Watching how things have worked over the last nine years, I believe that if we're directly accountable to an area, there's a strong accountability there, whereas now we're at large, which is flexible for the resident absolutely; they can pick the Councillor or many Councillors to work on their behalf. I find it not as effective as it can be because our Town has grown a bit larger and having that dedicated resource to that area and understanding the intimate concerns of that particular area? it allows a lot of benefit to the resident. I am very excited about this and hope we can move forward and see where this leads us.?

Less convinced, however, was Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

While Councillor Gaertner said it was fine to begin the process of exploring a ward system, she said emphasising in the motion that it is Council's wish to make a ward system a reality could jeopardize the consultation process.

?I think if we say, even in principle, that Council wants the ward system, it is biasing the public outreach and I think that, as Council, we're here to represent what the public wants, and the public could very well want a ward system, but I don't think if we're going to all this trouble for the review that we, as Council, should be telling the public up front what we want. We can tell them it is one of the main things we want to explore, but I feel this is the wrong way to go about it.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas said that while he understood the Councillor's concern that it would ?add a level of bias,? he saw it similar to the process Council recently undertook hiring an independent consultant to offer recommendations protecting the Town's stable neighbourhoods.

?There was concern about that too, but we gave clear direction to that issue and said we wanted the consultant to come in and give us changes and not say ?keep it the same,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?What we're doing here is presenting that clear direction of Council to say we want to move in this direction and we want the consultant to put forward options that would present this direction.?

Councillor Thompson also agreed that ?biasing public engagement? was a valid concern.

He underscored the ward question on the 2014 ballot that came down on the 'no side' and said by going this route he wanted to see 'the conversation move a little bit less from 'should we' or 'shouldn't we' to, 'if we move to wards, what should the boundaries look like? [and] have input from the residents on how to shape those boundaries. That is a significant process.

'The question on the ballot is the best way to do that decision-making process. We have those results, but I still think and I firmly believe this Council has made the decision that even though we know it was a close vote and it was a little bit more on the no side, we still believe this is the best way forward for Aurora, especially for a Town of our size. Let's engage the public but more so on how do we make this transition and what do these wards look like?'

Councillor John Gallo was not present at last week's Council meeting.