

Aurora moving towards recording closed-door meetings

Aurora is making tentative steps towards recording closed-door meetings of Council.

Council is set to consider a recommendation from staff this week to proceed with the recording of closed session meetings following the approval of a motion from Councillor Michael Thompson this past summer to report back on the logistics of doing so for all closed session meetings in the future.

This is an idea that has been around the Council table multiple times before, but Councillor Thompson cited recommendations from the Ontario Ombudsman stating that recordings of all meetings – both open and closed – ensure a complete record and help closed meeting investigators review proceedings if anything is called into question.

‘Obviously, we always try to conduct meetings in [the] open as much as possible,’ he said, noting some of the circumstances, such as land acquisitions and matters pertaining to identifiable individuals, where Closed Session meetings are required under the Municipal Act. ‘But sometimes there are concerns expressed with regards to whether or not there are any untoward actions or concerns with regards to it, maybe people aren't really supportive of the decision and they question that? anybody can go to the Ombudsman or a member of the public can ask for a meeting investigator [to look at] whether or not Council properly followed the rules.

‘I have talked about this from the first term on and put this forward that I think it is in our best interest to ensure that, should we ever be the unfortunate subject of an investigation, whether warranted or not, we have the ability to defend ourselves properly by audio recording the meeting so that there is no question that we're following the advice of our Solicitor, our Clerk, and our CAO that the meeting was conducted properly under the appropriate [section of] the Municipal Act.’

Underscoring the history behind his motion, Councillor Thompson referenced other local lawmakers, including 2006-2010 councillor Alison Collins Mrakas, who advocated for such recordings, as well as staff reports from 2015 by the Town's former solicitor outlining the pros, cons and concerns surrounding the recording of meetings.

‘I think all of that needs to be addressed,’ Councillor Thompson continued, ‘but year after year I have seen more and more municipalities within Ontario moving towards audio and/or video recording of Closed Session and they have been able to adopt policies and practices to address all of those concerns. From my perspective, I don't see any reason why we cannot take a look at those and adopt some of those best practices to address some of those concerns and put the Town in the best light to ensure there are no questions when we go into Closed Session with regards to the validity and legality of doing so.’

Although Council approved the motion on the table, they said they were looking forward to seeing the information that will be provided in the subsequent report now due to come back to the table before the end of 2020, before making a final decision.

‘I do like the fact it is a recommendation on policies and it was more around security, investigative and more protection of making sure that we're doing our jobs and the integrity of what we're being elected to do,’ said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ‘I would be interested in knowing the appropriateness of the situation from staff [so] it is not necessarily something we're enacting, it is coming back with a report with the recommendations [on] what would make sense for us.’

Added Councillor Harold Kim: ‘I would be in support not only with having audio recordings [to] help protect the Town and its citizens, but it also protects us as individual Councillors, as well.’

Mayor Tom Mrakas also noted his support, which extends back to his first term on Council from 2014 – 2018.

‘I think it is something important,’ he said. ‘As I stated earlier [in a discussion around a property acquisition related to Library Square] what is said back there is exactly what I would say out here. It is protection not only for Council members, [but] for

residents and for the Town as a whole.

?I think it is something we need to do. It is the right step and I am glad that we're hopefully [moving] in this direction after the motion this evening.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter