

Aurora says yes to retail pot shops



By Brock Weir

Aurora has opted in on retail cannabis sales.

Council's 5 ? 1 decision came Monday night at the end of a meeting that devolved into a chaotic scene as members of the public seated in Council Chambers erupted in anger when it was clear which way the smoke was blowing.

The motion to opt-in was made by Councillor Sandra Humfries, seconded by Councillor Rachel Gilliland, and supported by Mayor Tom Mrakas, along with Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo. Councillor Harold Kim was the lone dissenting voice, while Councillor Michael Thompson excused himself from the debate, citing a conflict of interest due to his job with a major pharmaceutical retailer.

27 members of the public approached the podium offering their opinions to Council, with just six speakers pressing Council to approve retail sales.

While Councillor Gallo's vote tipped the opt in camp into the majority, it was Councillor Gaertner's statement that she was of the same opinion that caused many in the crowd to erupt in anger, spurring arguments between supporters of the opt out position and residents on the other side.

Each Council member left at the table made equally impassioned speeches stating their case, with Mayor Mrakas leading the way. In stating why he was voting to opt in, the Mayor said the debate at hand was not about whether or not cannabis should be legal as that ship had already sailed due to legislation at the Federal government. He cautioned delegates and Council members alike that their decision this week should ?not be a proxy for a debate on the legalization of marijuana, nor should it be a debate about the morality of pot use.? Instead, he said, it should be about whether or not Aurora should opt in on a legal substance being sold in a retail outlet.

?Those decisions should be informed decisions based on the best available information and leave the emotions aside,? he said. ?I have reached out to a very broad range of stakeholders, from residents to the police chief, and I have reviewed as much of the available written information as possible. There are arguments to be made on both sides; some are fact-based and others are not, driven more by emotion about whether or not cannabis should be legal.?

While he said he had ?significant concerns? about the social and financial costs associated with recreational cannabis and not enough has been handed down by the upper levels of government to address these costs, the reality is people can now purchase, use and grow cannabis and, in the case of two local business, commercially produce the plant.

He disputed the idea presented by some members of the public that opting in would have an adverse impact on property values, stating he could find no evidence to support that argument and the existing local facilities have not resulted in a hit on property values.

?I share residents' concerns about youth access to controlled substances and, in particular, to tobacco, alcohol and now cannabis,? he continued. ?However, I have not seen any evidence to support the position that a retail outlet will increase the accessibility to youth.

In fact, reports suggest the opposite. Prior to legalization, 28 per cent of youth aged 15 to 24 use cannabis that they had purchased illegally. Access to legal cannabis was a significant problem and the intended purpose of the cannabis act is to address the illegal use and all the negative implications associated with it.

?Nothing we do here this evening will change the fact that cannabis is legal. A decision to opt out will not magically reduce the use of cannabis in our community; it will just limit one avenue for our residents to have access to a legal, federally regulated product and force them to drive 15 minutes down the road to Stouffville or Bradford while, at the same time, cut off access to tax revenue that our community will need to address the enforcement issues. For those reasons, I will be opting in.?

COUNCILLOR HAROLD KIM (OUT)

Speaking out against opting in, Councillor Kim agreed that the legal ship had sailed when it comes to cannabis and that no one refutes the fact it can have medicinal benefits with some conditions, but he said, like tobacco, the full impact of cannabis will not be known for decades.

?Many things are permissible, legal, but not all things are beneficial,? he said. Indeed, marijuana is now legal, but do we really, as a Town, want to promote it by allowing private retailers to open up a storefront? Let there be no mistake about it: private retailers will not be simply taking your order, they are here to turn a profit, as evidenced by the skyrocketing of marijuana stock on the stock exchanges. The profit-driven aspect of storefront stores means active promotion of the product. Promotion of an inherently bad thing is never good for public health.?

Public health and safety, he said, is a primary concern. Citing a wide variety of edibles available in some U.S. states where recreational cannabis is legal, he said the many ways cannabis can be consumed makes it ?particularly attractive and, thus dangerous? especially for our ?most vulnerable.?

?Ask any local high school teacher and they will tell you that many of our youth already struggle with focus, motivation, growing pains, mental illness and various addictions,? he concluded. ?Do we really need to open them up to new temptation? Storefront promotion, as sanctioned by the local government, will send the message that legal means perfectly okay, and it is not. In addition to these exacerbated health and safety concerns with the local distribution stores, storefront promotion of this highly toxic and addictive substance does not align with Aurora's character and reputation as a town committed to the environment and the health and active living of its citizens.?

COUNCILLOR SANDRA HUMFRIES (IN)

Putting forward the motion to opt in was ?an incredibly difficult decision,? said Councillor Humfries. But, it was an issue that hit close to home. In making her case, Councillor Humfries cited the experiences of her own daughter who, over a decade ago as a 15-year-old high school student decided to celebrate her birthday with friends, one of whom brought black market cannabis that was laced with rat poison.

She and their family dealt with the consequences of that for a number of years, she said.

?I am not suggesting a legalized retail store could have prevented that, or that [it wouldn't have] happened to my daughter or any other children, but?kids are going to make mistakes and we have to guide them as parents and grandparents, and we have to be their constant conscience. I have never tried, I am not a user, I don't intent to use cannabis. I don't judge anyone who does because if you need it, you need it. If you like it, go for it. I won't judge anybody, but I try to help and protect my children. My daughter made a mistake. If she could have asked an older person to go in and buy that, she could have avoided that issue and she probably would never have tried it again, and she wouldn't have the ongoing lingering effects she has until this date.

?These retail stores will provide a safe and regulated place for people to obtain a legalized substance. This is the first step in trying to get the illegal drugs off our streets, here in Aurora, and making them safe.?

COUNCILLOR RACHEL GILLILAND (IN)

Councillor Gilliland said she was ?not thrilled? that the onus of opting in our out was left to municipalities across Ontario, but that was the situation that faced Council and it was a decision she ?struggled? with. Her decision, she said, was solely about retail and not the morality of cannabis use, but it is hard not to get ?caught up in an emotional conclusion versus a factual conclusion.?

?Retail is here an inevitably it will be all around us,? she said. ?Yes, some towns have opted out because of uncertainty, however we live in a world of change, that is constantly evolving and one of the main objectives of legalizing cannabis is to fight and eliminate illegal operations and reduce access to our youth.

?It would be naïve for us to believe that opting out would reduce illegal activity. If youth really want cannabis, they can go down to

[online apps] and have it delivered to them within an hour, or maybe they will just go across the street and purchase it out of someone's coat pocket. Are we really going to hide our heads in sand and simply ignore that this is already happening in our back yard? I understand there is uncertainty, but I am even more concerned with the easy access to fentanyl-laced cannabis.?

She conceded there is still a ?stigma? surrounding cannabis, but the first step is educating the public about the product and ?pushing out illegal operators.?

?By choosing to limit access to this product, it is counterproductive to what the Government is trying to achieve, which is protecting our youth and our public health and safety. We really need to take the bull by the horns by investing in protecting these factors to strengthen our enforcement, our public health and safety of a federally and provincially regulated and legal product.?

COUNCILLOR JOHN GALLO (IN)

With three votes already in favour, Councillor Gallo's vote to opt in was the deciding vote. After listening to the 27 delegates, he said it was ?clear we live in a compassionate town? but it was also one of ?the most difficult decisions? he has had to make in his seven years on Council.

?I have two teenage children. It is quite personal for me. I have never smoked cannabis, I have no desire to smoke it, and I certainly at my kids age don't want them to smoke it. When they reach the age they legally can, it is entirely up to them if they want. I have some significant issues with what is before us and what has been presented before us,? said Councillor Gallo, noting he would have preferred the LCBO-style retail model for cannabis sales proposed by the previous provincial government.

Supporting his decision, he said it was his understanding that stores would be ?highly regulated? and retailers would face significant penalties if they didn't comply with regulations, including selling the products to people under the age of 19.

?Overall, my thoughts are that we live in a free society,? he said. ?It is a regulated legal product and how can I sit here and say no to having a legal, regulated product being sold at a retail store?? he said. ?I have difficulty with that. I wish I could have hung my hat onto something and I was hopeful tonight someone would have convinced me otherwise and I would have been happy to move in a different direction.?

Concluding his remarks, he said he asked representatives of the York Regional Police whether or not Aurora allowing retail cannabis stores would result in an increase in crime, and the answer was no.

COUNCILLOR WENDY GAERTNER (IN)

Although the decision had already been made with Councillor Gallo's position, Councillor Gaertner's statement that she was in favour of opting in caused the crowd to erupt.

After Council members left the Chamber for five minutes waiting for the shouting to die down, she returned to finish outlining her position.

?Unfortunately, the Provincial Government has put us in this position,? she said. ?The past provincial government had the model of retail outlet the way we do alcohol and, in my opinion, would have been the fairest and best way. Saying that, at present the reality is that cannabis is being sold illegally in Aurora. In my opinion, the legal sale of a legal substance in a retail store, is in the public's best interest. A properly regulated, self-regime with quality control under the guidance of staff, are significant to the health and safety of the public.?