

Candidates won't be able to campaign in parks this municipal election

This fall's municipal election will look different than in years past.

As the Town adopts a ward system, candidates will need to pick one of six wards they hope to represent and win over voters in their chosen neighbourhoods.

But if any potential candidate was hoping to make use of a local park to meet with their neighbours and potential constituents, they might be out of luck.

This month, Council is set to formalize a decision made on February 8 to disallow the use of municipal facilities, including parks, during the 2022 campaign.

In these circumstances, municipal facilities can include Town Hall, recreation centres, and Town-owned buildings. While Council was in favour of banning campaigning from these facilities, including parks into the mix proved to be more contentious.

"When I read that, what stood out to me was I thought it [the parks ban] was there specifically because we're moving into a ward system and if a candidate wanted to have a function at a park within their ward, they could rent that park facility and have that function in order to communicate with constituents in that ward," said Councillor John Gallo. "I didn't think there was any issue with that. I haven't heard what the problem is. If it is equal access across the board for every candidate and every candidate had the opportunity to rent the facility, I fail to see the negative if it is fair across the board."

Mayor Tom Mrakas, who previously supported the ban, said he saw Councillor Gallo's viewpoint in the issue, but if they were going to put the parks up for grabs, it wouldn't be as simple as making an amendment at the Council table.

"Maybe there might not be a problem if you look at it from a parks perspective but the [clause] also looks at the Community Centre," said Mayor Mrakas. "A parks scenario, I can see that, especially as we move into a ward system to be able to hold a little barbecue to get to know residents in the area. If it is fair right across the board, it is fair right across the board. If we're going to allow the community centres there, we need to change a lot more than wording."

Councillor Harold Kim, himself a veteran of the recent Federal election campaign, held a different viewpoint. While he said allowing the use of parks during a non-campaign period would be appropriate, having that option during a true campaign period was something else.

"I don't see how renting a Town space, including a park, and holding a campaign event is any different than having a sign at Town Park or any other Town facility or property," he said. "I cannot separate, in my mind, a park from any other Town property. I would not be in favour of the amendment. I thought the concern was raised during a non-campaign season. I think during campaign time I think we should be consistent with all Town property."

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: "I am concerned about carving out parks. I am thinking of access for all. All of a sudden it would become a race to reserve the park as early as possible. Does everyone who is a candidate have equal access to it? Does it put staff in an awkward position whereby candidates may say that those incumbents have the inside track? I like the idea of specific dates for specific parks, and a little more rules and regulations around it, but it may be opening up a can of worms and I will take the time between now and Council [to think] about it.

It is a good idea to be able to have an opportunity to have that barbecue and have a meet and greet, but I think there needs to be some more work done on how we would manage that so it seems fair and equal to all, not just first come first served. I won't be in favour of the motion as it stands."

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