

Council approves pay hike after contentious meeting, but debate is not over

Aurora Councillors will be paid more for their work effective immediately, following a contentious Council meeting on October 24.

On a vote of 4 to 3, Council members voted to bring their salaries up to \$52,000 from their previous salary of approximately \$38,000 per year. Voting in favour of the pay hike were Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

Recommendations for the pay raise came out of an arm's-length committee struck by Council to review Council compensation but the recommendations proved very contentious and the fight might be far from over.

Following the vote last week, the pay increase kicked in immediately and will be funded by the tax rate stabilization reserve for the balance of 2023 and will be funded from the same pot in 2024. In 2025, this funding model will be covered 50 per cent by the Town's tax rate stabilization reserve and 50 per cent by taxpayers and, by 2026, will be fully shouldered by the tax rate.

But this arrangement might only last through to the end of this year as the Strong Mayor powers granted to the Mayor of Aurora by the Province this fall gives the Head of Council significant authority over the drafting of budgets.

As per the legislation, the Mayor is required to present a budget and it is the Mayor's Budget working with staff and presenting it to Council and the public and that's what I will be doing, Mayor Tom Mrakas, who voted against the pay raise along with Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, tells The Auroran. It will not be included in the budget. What transpired on Tuesday will not be included in the 2024 Budget and the only way it will be if there is an amendment from Council to include it.

The move will likely result in last week's arguments both for and against the increase being rehashed around the Council table when the time comes.

Council members tentatively greenlit the changes at the Committee level on October 17 and, in the intervening week between that General Committee meeting and last Tuesday's Council meeting, the decision sparked a flurry of discussion within the community on both sides of the issue.

Among the thorniest proposals was to make the pay hike retroactive to the start of this Council term, going back to 2022. Near the start of last week's debate, however, this retroactivity was taken off the table and the proposed new vehicle allowance for each Councillor, initially floated as \$7,000 per year, slashed to \$3,500.

Nevertheless, tensions remained high and discussions were kicked off by Mayor Tom Mrakas, who said residents overwhelmingly do not accept the increase a view he shared, he said.

I do not support any additional increase to Council's compensation for this term of office and I do not support any increase to the Mayor's compensation this term or next, he said, before making a successful motion to nix any salary increase for the Mayor's Office. I would like to remind members that Council and staff are already receiving an increase this term. To refresh members' memories, we just ratified our CUPE agreement with our unionized staff [and] we negotiated a four-year agreement which will see a COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment) step salary of 11 per cent over four years - three per cent in 2023, 2.5 per cent for each of 2024 and 2025, and three per cent for 2026. It means over the term of Council, members of Council and staff will see an 11 per cent total increase to salaries or, to Council members, an increase of up to \$4,300 for compensation by the end of the term.

Any changes to Council pay, he added, should be set by the outgoing Council and effective at the start of the next term.

Councillor Kim was next to speak against the changes, stating public trust is critical for a public servant to successfully do their

jobs.?

?That public trust is critical for us to do our jobs,? he said. ?If the residents are our boss, we have to listen to what they have to say.?

Making an ultimately unsuccessful motion to have the matter referred to a later date, he said the extra time would allow the Town to ?engage with an external third party? for an in-depth review of compensation with any changes effective for the 2026-2030 term.

Amendments to reduce the vehicle allowance and remove the retroactive component were made by Councillor Gallo. In doing so, he said he ?makes no apologies? for the previous motion as these efforts have been made ?to provide equity.?

?I want to move forward in a cohesive way,? he said on removing some of the more contentious parts from the motion. ?I want to be clear that the recommendation for the first two years has zero tax impact. I also want to stress that the full impact on the tax base for this increase, specifically to the wages, is somewhere between 90 and 95 cents per resident per year. I am comfortable moving forward with this notwithstanding the public's opinion.?

Councillor Weese said he was glad to see the same elements taken out of the debate, and said while he was campaigning last year, Council compensation was never brought up. Nevertheless, he said the suggestions stemming from the Committee were based on comparators to like municipalities like Newmarket.

?I believe the attempt to place our Council with those in Newmarket was really an obvious thing,? he said, noting he'd like to see a process move forward where a Compensation Review Committee is automatically struck in the final year of the term so these thorny debates don't happen again. ?For now, the proposal in front of us seems reasonable and represents management of the circumstances, and I believe they have to be managed?. I'll vote my conscience on this, but listen to my Council colleagues to see what they have to say about all the amendments to this.?

Next up was Councillor Thompson who said he didn't support any increases at all for the 2022-2026 term of Council.

?I have had the good fortune to serve on Council for 12 years and in my first term of Council we dealt with Council compensation because the preceding Council of 2006 ? 2010 did not do Council compensation,? he said. ?In 2012 we looked at it and in 2013 we made recommendations?for the subsequent term of Council. This has happened before, but never has a sitting Council given themselves a raise.?

In response, Councillor Gilliland pointed out that Council received a boost in 2017 after the Federal Government made some of the income received by elected members taxable, but she said ?no one likes to be put in this position ever.?

?Right now we're talking about punting it down the line to the next term? we're struggling,? she said. ?There's a lot going on in the economy, there are a lot of people who are struggling with inflation, food and all that. We're people, too, right? I don't like being in this position. I really don't.?

Councillor Weese offered a similar thought, citing this as a ?human resources management issue? and all the debate around the table was doing was ?providing division?when we should all be thinking about doing the same things because when we all do the same things and we're on the same page, we're going to get more things done.?

?I am really disappointed we were [fractured] in this way and were involved with this division,? he said. ?At the end of the day, we have to manage this and if we don't have the courage to manage it right now, we're just punting that ahead by two years, three years, and that's not doing anybody any good. It will just be the next Council having to deal with the problems all over again.?

As the meeting continued, the level of contention rose, with barbs traded between lawmakers becoming more personal by the minute.

Mayor Mrakas said what the Councillors in favour of the raise were doing was 'engaging in political theatre' and they had nobody to blame but themselves.

'You made the decisions, you need to justify the decisions that you make,' he said. 'I justify the decisions I make every week. I have been doing that for nine years with the public where I put out a post and I explain what has occurred at Council. I justify those decisions that I make and I make no bones about it?.. I have been working hard for this community. The residents like it, and it showed in the last election. I will continue to do the job I need to do to make sure the residents receive the best possible service for the best possible price.

'This here, as some have mentioned, Council has signed a four-year contract with the residents of our community. You now want to break that contract with the residents. Tell me that's not shameful. I have heard that word being thrown out this entire conversation. That's shameful and no one put anyone into this position, as I said, other than themselves.'

After a fraught back-and-forth between he and Councillor Gilliland after the latter said he was trying to get the last word, she described what was transpiring as 'a political Gong Show.'

'I have noticed many times when we don't get our way, sometimes the Head of Council [has said] we need to collaborate and work together to solve an issue. I would say the same thing for our Council,' she said, before addressing the Mayor. 'I understand you don't want your raise. That's fine, I agree, you're the highest-paid Mayor of the N6 (York Region's northern six municipalities) ? while your Councillors have been the lowest and it's an awkward, awkward situation.

'This has not been easy, it takes guts. I hope that we have come to a solution that is fair, equitable ? equitable pay.'

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