

Council calls on province to put their money where their mouth is with election reforms

By Brock Weir

When it comes to reforming how municipal elections are run, Aurora's Council says what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

The move came as Council was asked to weigh in on the Province's review of the Municipal Elections Act, a review which covers five key areas: campaign financing, third party advertising, accessibility, enforcement and ranked ballots of candidates.

It was this last point, however, which became a sticking point at last week's meeting.

Councillors were considering a report from staff, which would serve as Aurora's official response to these five key changes.

Under the potential changes, Ontario will give municipalities the option of instituting ranked ballots for Councillors in future elections.

The Town's view was ranked ballots were a 'fundamental departure' for voters used to the current first-past-the-post system that would likely cause 'confusion' both for new and seasoned voters. This confusion, they said, could result in a hit on the already 'extremely low' voter turnout experienced in Aurora.

'As the order of government most familiar with their own community circumstances, municipalities should be permitted to determine on their own if they wished to use ranked ballots in any future municipal election,' said Town Staff. 'To implement ranked ballots in a fair and consistent manner, an extended period of time between nomination day and voting day would be required. The municipal clerk would require the extended time to prepare for and test all systems that would be required in a ranked ballot election.'

Council generally agreed with the opinion of staff last week, but went a step further at the urging of Councillor Paul Pirri. Speaking against a ranked ballot, he said Ontario voters spoke 'very strongly' against such an issue less than a decade ago, but if Ontario is keen on making this change, they should lead the pack.

'I can understand a government wanting to implement this and I commend the Provincial government for moving in that direction, but I would like to formally put an amendment to this and request that if they are going to have municipalities go to proportional representation, it is only fair the Provincial government also implement this system because it is beyond me why they think this is a good idea they would implement for us but not themselves,' said Councillor Pirri.

Councillors Tom Mrakas and Michael Thompson agreed with the suggestion, with the latter suggesting 'what's good for the goose is good for the gander.'

'[The Province] talked about ranked ballots and potentially giving voters a greater say, increased voter engagement, and they throw out all kinds of superlatives and reasons to do it, and yet there's no mention of them doing it themselves,' said Councillor Thompson. 'If that is their view of ranked ballots, they should lead by example.'

In the view of Councillor Jeff Thom, moving to a ranked balloting system was 'ludicrous' but asking for the Province to take the first move was a step too far.

'I appreciate the cheekiness [of the motion, but] the proposals they put forward in this report are actually quite ludicrous,' he said. 'I haven't seen anything like this and certainly I wouldn't be a proponent for it at the municipal level. I am not a proponent of it at the municipal level, so if they force the municipalities to ranked balloting, I certainly would not want them to get the idea I am in favour.'

That being said, however, there are other changes Aurora Councillors said they would like to see when it comes to how Aurorans cast their vote.

Council approved a further motion from Councillor Harold Kim that names on the ballots should be randomized to level the playing field and eliminate any advantages those nearing the top of the alphabetized list could receive. Councillor John Abel, who has ranked at the top of the last two municipal ballots, threw his support behind the idea, as did the rest of Council, and that recommendation is now on its way to the Province.

Council also approved a further suggestion from Councillor Pirri calling those looking to seek elected office within Aurora include signatures from not less than 20 residents to be submitted along with their nomination forms.

A further motion, again from Councillor Kim, suggesting the fees one has to pay in order to stand for public office be increased from the present \$100, fizzled.