

Council candidates split on whether Aurora should have ward system

By Brock Weir

On October 22, Aurorans will vote for up to six candidates for Council.

Ahead of this year's election, Council voted to reduce its numbers from the present eight members, plus mayor, to six, following a referendum in the 2014 Municipal Election where voters said they would like to see a smaller Council.

This, said local lawmakers in favour of shrinking the size of Council, was the first step on the road to implementing a ward system. Aurora is currently governed in an 'at large' system where the soon-to-be six Council members are voted by 'at large' and represent 'at large' the Town as a whole. A ward system, on the other hand, would see Aurora voted into electoral districts that would vote for one Councillor to represent, and be responsible to, them at the table.

All four mayoral candidates have expressed support for Aurora adopting a ward system over this campaign, while the views of the 16 residents vying for a place at the Council are split when it comes to whether a ward system would benefit the ward.

Here's what they think, pro-ward, con-ward, undecided or mixed.

MATTHEW ABAS (PRO)

'I think a ward system is great,' he says. 'Many residents have indicated to me that a ward system that would specifically make one Councillor responsible for issues of the residents in their ward. This would help prevent issues that remain unaddressed. In addition to the ward system there would be the need to also consider Councillors being full-time. Councillors who do not support the ward system tend to be incumbents that are well known and have a better chance of being elected. Hints of amalgamation exist and a ward system is likely inevitable in the long term.'

IAN CLARK (CON)

'In a ward system, you lose diversity in Council,' he says. 'In an election year, let's say four years ago, when the largest issue coming out was accountability to the taxpayer for spending, let's say we divide Aurora into four and in each ward the one guy beating the drum loudest for accountability for spending of tax dollars is probably going to be elected in all four wards. Now your Council is made up of all clones, the exact same person elected in all the wards, and that is your representation. The Council is going to be very well-suited to financial accountability, but they are going to fall well-short of caring about the environment or facilities in Town.'

WENDY GAERTNER (CON)

'I have always been opposed to a ward system simply because I like the idea of people being able to come to anyone on Council,' she says. 'Sometimes the Ward Councillor and some of the residents don't see eye to eye, so it gives everyone an opportunity to speak to anyone who will listen to them.'

JOHN GALLO (CON)

'I am not there yet,' he says. 'I am still of a belief that a Councillor at Large system works for this Town. I have never been a part of the ward, I am just imagining it and seeing how others work. I have been a part of this system, and I have never experienced it not working either being on Council or off Council. I think it is a system that works and until someone can convince me otherwise I wouldn't change it.'

RACHEL GILLILAND (PRO)

'I think it's time,' she says. 'We're one of the only municipalities at this population level that doesn't have a ward system. I think it is to our benefit to be able to have a Councillor represent specific areas of your Town. I think it allows for more personal attention.'

DERRICK HAMMETT (PRO)

'At this time I would be in favour of a ward system for a few reasons,' he says. '[It encourages] new residents to put their name forward to represent. Right now a majority of Council and Mayor candidates have come from the west side of Town (west of Bayview) and are usually long-term residents like myself ' even though I now live on the east side of Bayview. [It addresses]

concerns of the specific areas of their ward. This election, most of the concerns resides around the Armoury, Henderson Forest, and Stable Neighbourhoods, which leaves other concerns to take a bit of a back seat, such as completing the [Wildlife Park] and the ponds being dry, and traffic/speeding issues along Bayview and in the subdivisions east of Bayview. Mr. Hammett adds a ward system, would promote different cultures and interests being represented through sports and recreation, while making it easier for candidates to reach out to their ward residents and, in turn, prompt residents to learn more about the candidates running in their respective wards.

DAVID HEARD (PRO)

The public made their choice, he said, referring to the 2014 Referendum.

JAMES HOYES (UNDECIDED/HYBRID)

A ward system is a better idea in principle, but it limits residents' ability to talk to their Ward Councillor if their Ward Councillor is not available, he says. It makes it very difficult for you to go to someone and get a response because technically they don't really have to. I am more of a fan of a hybrid system. I would like to see something more along the lines of four or six councillors ward-style and two at large. Four wards and two at-large would be significant and that allows the residents a place to plug in to more than one area. This Town is very split in regards to geography and population, so I am not sure how the ward system would cut into neighbourhoods.

SANDRA HUMFRYES (PRO)

For me, a ward system allows peer accountability for the Councillor that is responsible, that Councillor will have a budget, and will have specific concerns in those areas, she says. I like that the Councillor lives in that area so they are familiar with those things and those items that might be a concern of the residents. I believe it actually will provide the focus that some residents are wanting in their area. I have thought about this the whole eight years that I have been on Council.

HAROLD KIM (PRO-TO-MIXED)

The challenge for Aurora becoming a ward system is its geographic size, he says. We're not a huge landmass, so in order to divide Aurora, the wards won't be as large as some of the others. I think the positives of an at-large system, having been in the system as a Councillor, you get to see and understand all of the issues in all four corners of Aurora. The negative of the ward system is you only get to see your segment. The positive is residents know who to call and who to email if there is an issue or they have some comments. [After Council voted to shrink its numbers from eight to six] we're going to have to hope the next Council will implement the second phase, which is to implement the ward system, and lay the groundwork in terms of how that is going to look.

ANNA KROEPLIN (PRO)

I think that having a ward system is pivotal to the communication for Council by residents, she says. Instead of having six Councillors now being in charge of 50,000 people, it will be 8,000 people. I think you can be much more effective and get to know the grassroots of your area.

DANIEL LAJEUNESSE (CON)

There are pluses and minuses to both, he says. On the plus side of wards, it allows for our community to familiarize themselves with a Councillor and not having to worry about which one, [and it can improve communications] however, it also has some detriments in terms of pushing certain geographies. Maybe there is an underrepresentation of some of the newer parts of Aurora because nobody with experience is representing that geography. I am more in favour of how it is today. As we continue to grow, and the growth has been quite significant, it is something that should be revisited maybe before the next election.

VICKY McGRATH (UNDECIDED)

I think both have merit, she says. I would say a ward system gives people within the community a stable voice. It gives them someone to go to and they know who their Councillor is in a ward system. However, at large also provides people with options if they don't feel their Councillor in their ward is helpful or attentive, or has the same agenda, then they have options. I feel both have merit and it would be interesting to see how it goes.

ADAM MOBBS (UNDECIDED)

?My thought is the Town of Aurora residents should decide whether an election at large or a ward system is appropriate,? he says. ?There are pros and cons to each system. If we did move to a ward system, I would want it in a pie-shaped format to a point where each ward has a little piece of the downtown core to make sure the downtown doesn't get neglected and all Councillors have a very strong, significant reason to enhance the downtown.?

MICHAEL THOMPSON (MIXED)

?I was, and still am, supportive of the Governance Committee's recommendation that we review our system of representation at the beginning of the next term,? he says. ?This would allow ample opportunity for the public's input and participation. While both systems have their pros and cons, I'd also like the future Council to explore a hybrid system. In this system, you would have wards but also an 'at large' Councillor who would serve as the Deputy Mayor and possibly, in the future, as our second Regional representative for Aurora.?

DENIS VAN DECKER (PRO)

?I think we should go to four full-time wards split at Yonge and Wellington,? he says. ?We'd each get a piece of the downtown, less Councillors, less uninformed meetings of everyone wanting to get their opinion in. The only problem I have with the ward system is what happens when somebody decides to stonewall you because they didn't like how you presented yourself or were critical in some way.?