

## Council considers restricting open forum, broadcasts in election year

**By Brock Weir**

Broadcasts of Council and General Committee meetings, as well as Open Forum, could be shut down early this year as the 2014 Municipal Election approaches.

Councillors are considering a recommendation from municipal staff to cease bi-weekly broadcasts of Aurora's Council meetings on Rogers-TV and alternate weeks of live streaming online General Committee meetings at the end of June to "avoid any inappropriate use of the Town's resources for campaign-related purposes". Additional recommendations include terminating Open Forum, the time at the beginning of each Council meeting for residents to come and speak their mind on a variety of issues, also at the end of June.

"[This would keep Open Forum] from being misused for electioneering, which would put the Chair of the Council meeting in the awkward situation of having to interrupt members of the public from speaking out and dismissing them from the podium," said Town Solicitor Warren Mar in his report to Council.

His recommendations were discussed at last week's General Committee meeting. Although a final decision has been delayed until next week, Councillors were reluctant to act on anything which might limit its interaction with the public, particularly when it came to broadcasting and live streaming.

"Council meetings are not televised for the benefit and convenience of Council," argued Councillor Evelyn Buck. "They are televised for the benefit of the people at home who want to pay attention to what we are doing and, more importantly, they want to pay attention immediately before an election [more] than any other time."

These were concerns shared by the majority of Council, including Councillor Michael Thompson who said Councillors have the "inherent responsibility" to keep the public informed and a balance had to be struck between "open and transparent government" versus potential "misuse" of the forum.

"My preference is to continue broadcasting," he said. "If Rogers chooses not to broadcast it, then so be it, but that will be their decision. As long as we are conducting Town business, it is important that the Town be able to be engaged and informed."

According to Mr. Mar, municipalities such as King and Markham do not broadcast their Council meetings by live video, although Markham provides an audio feed, which they will continue throughout the election period. Newmarket does not stop broadcasting their meetings due to the impending election, but Rogers will cut their feed at their final Council meeting of September to allow for the campaign. Status quo will remain throughout the election period for Richmond Hill and Vaughan.

Councillors, however, were more divided when it came to Open Forum. Speaking in favour of cutting off the microphone by the end of June, Councillor Thompson said it was in line with recommendations coming from other municipalities that follow a similar pattern where people can come up to the podium during an election campaign, make "outlandish statements" and Council, under proper procedure, has no way to formally respond to their statements.

"People could come in and make accusations rightly or wrongly and there is no opportunity to rebut those," he said. "There may be greater potential in the run-up to an election for somebody to come in and make outlandish statements and there is nothing we could do. As a delegation [Council] would be able to respond."

These were sentiments shared by Councillor Paul Pirri, but others, such as Councillor Buck, said Open Forum should remain open to all until, in the words of Councillor Chris Ballard, "the bitter end."

"I think Open Forum is one of the better things we have done," he said. "I love the spontaneity that at 6.55 on a Tuesday someone can be upset and passionate and be able to talk to us about it. If someone is saying something at the podium they perhaps shouldn't

be saying, we have the opportunity to cut off their microphone and tell them to cease.

?If someone is being slandered, I guess there are always options for them. It is all part of the process. I would hate to see it ended because I think it is a fantastic way for people to come forward without having to do a lot of prep and tell us what they are feeling.?

Mr. Mar's recommendations would also limit campaigning at Town-operated events such as Ribfest in September, or the summer Concerts in the Park series. Councillor John Gallo, however, said he didn't agree with that recommendation and questioned the harm if someone wanted to ?walk around with a t-shirt and hand out flyers?. Although Mr. Mar said that those events are there to ?foster a sense of community? and not for electioneering, he said it is just being fair. Councillor Gallo, nevertheless, pressed on.

?What better opportunity for the Town to facilitate these events than having the residents in the Town have a better understanding of who they could potentially be voting for?? he said.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, said she disagreed.

?I agree when people come to our events they are coming to enjoy themselves and I don't think it is right that we campaign there,? she said. ?I think we can wear buttons and t-shirts, but I don't think we [should] actively campaign.?