

Council gets a pay raise again ? but how long will it last?

Aurora Councillors are once again getting a pay raise ? but how long it lasts will once again be in the hands of Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Council last week voted in favour of a salary increase of more than 30 per cent. It's a similar salary increase first discussed at Council last fall, which was subsequently approved by a Council majority only to be rescinded by Mayor Tom Mrakas during the 2024 Budget process using his Strong Mayor powers.

The motion passed again last week was the same motion brought forward this past winter by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, which was again vetoed by Mayor Mrakas.

Council gave its latest approval to the motion at the March 26 session on a vote of 4 ? 2.

Voting in favour of the pay increase were Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and Councillor Gallo. Mayor Mrakas and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim voted against the motion, and Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who has previously been in opposition, was absent from the meeting.

Once again, Mayor Mrakas may use his Strong Mayor powers to veto the legislation, but announced on March 27 meeting he would consider the matter over the following 14 days.

?We have now debated and discussed a Council compensation increase four times in less than a year,? he said. ?As a Council, I believe our focus should be on more pressing matters that directly impact our residents. I will not be swayed or pressured into approving a decision that residents of Aurora have made clear to me they staunchly oppose, and I believe does not serve the best interests of our community.

?After careful consideration, and as required by the Municipal Act, I have notified Council of my intention to potentially veto the proposed bylaw seeking to immediately increase Council's total compensation by 42.6 per cent and salaries by 30 per cent, as the utilization of funds from the tax rate stabilization fund was not anticipated for this purpose when the 2024 Budget was adopted. I will take the next 14 days as per the Act and carefully consider this option, and what is in the best interest of the community.?

He added he hoped last week's debate would ?mark the conclusion? of the matter, ?allowing us to redirect our focus to more urgent and productive matters.?

In bringing his motion back, Councillor Gallo said it was to give colleagues who were absent from the last go-round an opportunity to make their views known.

?This is before us because it was a tie vote and Councillor Kim was not there,? he said. ?It's unfortunate that Councillor Kim and Councillor Thompson are not here to express their opinions or vote on the matter, especially considering, should it pass, they will benefit from it.?

The last debate failed on a tie vote as Councillor Gilliland had left the table, stating she didn't ?recognize? the motion or what the ultimate outcome would be. Last week, she said there was a ?lack of information? at the time.

?I do believe in equality and fair compensation,? she said last week. ?This compensation recommendation came from a citizen committee made up of business and HR professionals, signed off by the CAO and HR professional department.?

There were ?many misleading numbers floating around? since the matter was last before Council, she contended, and underscored Aurora's Councillors are the second-lowest paid in the Region.

Council members and residents within York Region, she said, have 'reached out to us to personally share the same sentiment' and this feedback made Council members 'feel valued.'

'In my opinion, we are back here not about the compensation, but my belief about the process and the Strong Mayor powers that were utilized,' she continued. 'The fact is this was passed by Council and fully funded by the rate stabilization with zero impact on the tax levy. I really do feel for staff ' I want to shout out because they were asked for clarification from the Ministry and the Ministry simply pushed it back to staff and said, 'You figure it out. You determine how that legislation is to be determined' thus being a very grey area. As such, I did seek external legal counsel as recommended by staff and the question still remains: does Strong Mayor powers have oversight of the budget only when it relates to affecting the tax levy, or both? Since there is already a funding source that didn't affect the levy, that is the question?. [This] is an over-reach and a process that lurks in the grey area that is not fully understood.

'I have heard from the residents and I stand for fairness and equity, but for me, it is not just about me ' it is about the next person and the person after that that sits in this chair. I have listened and I have already listened to the concerns of the residents and have said before I wouldn't engage in any of the compensation benefits. I will be voting in favour of this process because, as I said, I believe this is an over-reach and the process that lurks in the grey area 'not fully understood. Strong Mayor powers outside of advancing housing priorities is simply undemocratic ' strong and wrong.'

Speaking to the motion, Councillor Gallo said he wanted to address the idea that 'this should have been done last term and it wasn't, therefore any increase should be for the next term of Council.' The process here, he said, is not particularly different as Council would be voting on recommendations from a committee struck in the previous term.

'You can change the timing of it and that's fine, but a committee was struck, we took that what the committee had recommended, and we moved that forward,' he said. 'It is no different than if we struck a committee last year. Those recommendations would have found themselves on a budget and the sitting Council would have approved their increase. It happens every year. Every term it happens. There is no difference here. This concept that we're doing something wrong is preposterous and I certainly wouldn't be putting this forward this many times if I thought I was doing something wrong or incorrect or unjustified.'

Councillor Gaertner was of a similar viewpoint, adding it is 'not Council's responsibility' to bring a Council Compensation Committee forward, but rather of staff.

'I believe it is an oversight on the part of the administration,' she said.

In stating his position at the table, Mayor Mrakas said not only was he 'tired' of seeing this come forward, 'I think most of the public is,' too.

'Council can absolutely have approved this for next year,' he said. 'That was the recommendation that was in front of us in October. It was on the recommendation on the agenda. Any Councillor last term could have put forward a motion and last year to look at Council compensation, yet no one sitting at this table, excluding Councillor Weese because he wasn't here, put anything forward.

'I am still opposed to this. I have heard from many residents that they opposed this, so I stand by what the majority of the residents feel and I have also heard from many elected officials across this Province that can't believe that such an increase is being put forward at this time.'

Under the terms of what was first approved in 2023, the raise would have been funded completely from the Tax Rate Stabilization Fund in 2023 and 2024 before things changed in 2025. In that year, the raise will be shared 50 per cent by the reserve and 50 by the taxpayers. The impacts would solely born by the tax rate beginning in 2026.

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