

Delegates say Councillors 'broke contract' with public with pay raise

From accusations of being 'tone-deaf' to breaking a contract with voters, there was no shortage of opinions from members of the public at Town Hall last week as Council members prepared to greenlight a pay raise for elected members.

Three delegates came forward to express their opposition to the plan, including former Councillor Sandra Humfryes, former Ward 2 Council candidate Marco Di Girolamo, and resident John Hartman - with several more members of the public in the audience waiting to hear the debate and decision.

'I agree that Council members should be compensated appropriately for what they do,' said Humfryes, who served as Councillor between 2010 and 2022, and was defeated by rookie candidate Ron Weese in Ward 1 in last fall's municipal election. 'I support the need for a compensation review, sure, however I think you should consider not just a select comparator group [among other municipalities but] an analysis of actual workload by members. This is the first term of Council with a Ward system. Aurora Councillors now represent wards [rather than the Town at large] and what is the impact of that on Council workload? Is it more? Is it less? I think we need an objective [review] so we have a better sense of appropriate compensation and whether an increase is warranted next term.'

Whether or not Aurora Councillors were paid less than their Newmarket counterparts was irrelevant, she said, as candidates in the 2022 municipal election knew what the compensation was before they put themselves forward.

'You are just 10 months into these roles and you're asking the public to accept an approximate 40 per cent wage increase?not to mention a lump sum of retroactive pay. It is just simply not acceptable. Honestly, how can this be acceptable to any of you?... In this current climate where many have been laid off, it strains reason that you believe after mere months on the job and after signing a contract for a set salary you deserve a huge increase. How do you think the majority of residents feel about this?'

'Yes, a compensation review wasn't done last term. It wasn't done in Newmarket, either. Many, if not all Ontario municipalities also didn't do Council compensation reviews. Why? We were dealing with more important issues like how to protect residents and businesses from the health and economic impact of COVID, not whether to give Councillors a raise. In 12 years on Council and 12 years of residence, I have never been witness to a Council considering giving themselves an immediate and sizable pay increase.'

In his delegation, Di Girolamo also commented on today's economic challenges.

The resident, who unsuccessfully ran against incumbent Rachel Gilliland in Ward 2 last year, said it was 'tone-deaf of members of Council to say you deserve more'when so many in our community are struggling to do more with less.

'One of three Councillors did not view the Compensation Review process as important enough to provide feedback through the survey,' he said. 'Aurora is above average as it relates to population density per square kilometre, meaning Councillors have less distance to travel... than the comparator, yet a car allowance increase is being recommended. This is also a cunning way of increasing one's salary under the guise of an expense or allowance. Aurora is below average in overall population, below average in number of constituents being served per member of Council, below average in capital budget and has an average operating budget. Yet an increase to salary that is above average verses the comparator is being recommended.'

'It is my understanding that a review of Newmarket was done in 2017 and it was deemed to be too rich, but that is being used as justification for an increase. It is also my understanding that Council is due to receive an 11 per cent increase over the term through the Cost of Living adjustment. Where has this increase been considered in the discussion and recommendations? Something is not adding up to me and it seems further due diligence is required. However, notwithstanding these concerns, if the recommendation for an increase is deemed to be justified and further due diligence and after further due diligence an increase of significance should be achieved over multiple years to reduce the burden on the taxpayer for a spend which does not provide any immediate value to them, and most definitely should not be provided retroactively. It should only take effect at the start of the next term to avoid any

perceived conflict? of the sitting Council establishing their own compensation.?

Hartman, who said he has been a resident of Aurora for 35 years and came to the podium with ?various leadership roles within the philanthropic sector? under his belt was of a similar perspective, stating that in standing for election ?you made a promise or pledge to the Town and its residents.?

?Somebody dropped the ball? on striking a compensation review committee in the final year of the last Council, he contended, but ?it should not be the residents who pick up your misstep.?

?Call it a contract,? he said. ?You should not be allowed to change those terms, timing or conditions. I believe this is simply wrong. What is the urgency to do this now? Why retroactive and immediate? Is it due to the street-speak that several Councillors might be leaving for other levels of government before their term in Aurora expires? Is this why you support retroactive immediacy and extended severance packages? Sounds to me like pay me now so I can leave early.?

Councillor roles, he said, are part-time positions while the role of the Mayor is full time, yet he cited a disparity in the results of a survey carried out by the Committee on Council workload, with some members saying their work accounts for ?as few as six hours [per week]? while another responded said the clocked in 20 hours.

?That suggests a discrepancy in effort. Seems off to me,? he said.

?Transparency, accountability and getting stuff done ? when you signed up [you] knew the compensation, the amount of car allowance, health elements and other elements in the pay pack. At the same time, you also signed up to work with your fellow Council members and the Mayor. I completely disagree that compensation is about respect as Councillor Gaertner noted during the meeting. Compensation is about accountability, KPIs and results for our Town.

?I support a fair increase to come into effect at the beginning of a new term. Not now. I support the creation of developing a proper go-forward budget process not using the tax rate stabilization fund. I do not support a dental and health plan on my shoulders or the shoulder of residents. Do you really need a \$7,000 car allowance in this Town? I wonder if you truly understand the realities that most of us [pay]: inflation, housing costs, energy costs, food, hydro, etc., and affordability and seek a 41 per cent increase. It seems like a general slap in our collective faces.?

Over the course of the meeting, amendments were made to make the pay hike effective immediately rather than retroactively and the proposed vehicle allowance, as mentioned above, was slashed in half.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter