

Get ready for a smaller Council in 2018

By Brock Weir

Your decision in next fall's municipal election just got easier ? or more difficult, depending on your perspective.

Council voted last Tuesday night to reduce its composition to just six members of Council (plus the Mayor) from the current slate of eight.

The decision was made in a 6 ? 2 vote with Councillors Wendy Gaertner and Jeff Thom voting against the motion, which was brought forward by Councillor Sandra Humfryes. Mayor Geoff Dawe was not present for the meeting.

Councillor Humfryes told Council she brought this motion forward due to feedback stemming from the Town's Governance Review Committee. Their advice, she said, provided powerful evidence of a ?forward thinking? view and leaves the door open to future consideration within Aurora for implementing a ward system.

The issue of reducing the size of Council was one of two referendum questions on the 2014 Municipal Election ballot.

While nearly two-thirds of Aurorans who took the time to cast their ballots voted in favour of the reduction, it fell short of the threshold set to make the decision binding on Council.

Shortly after the current Council roster was inaugurated, they ultimately elected to keep the status quo.

?When this was brought forward [the last time] Councillor Pirri was pretty powerful in terms of why he felt this was the right thing to do in reducing Council members,? said Councillor Humfryes noting she believed, at the time, reducing the size of Council should go hand in hand with implementing a ward system, a further referendum question in 2014 which was rejected by voters. ?For me, [this reduction] provides an accountability to my community and my area. I would love to pave the road in the next couple of terms to become a very powerful Council [with wards]. I think this is step one and then onto step two.?

Speaking in favour of the motion, Councillor Paul Pirri reiterated his previous position, inviting his fellow Council members to offer why they had a change of heart.

?I don't understand why people may or may not have changed their minds on the issue,? he said. ?If people can rationalize that, great; there's absolutely no need to, but I think this is the second time we're looking at this and I would like to understand what the change is.?

That change was clear for Councillor Michael Thompson, who said the intervening years have allowed him more time to speak to lawmakers in other towns and cities, finding 75 per cent of Ontario municipalities operate with less than nine members of Council. ?Talking about how best to move forward and be effective in our governance got me rethinking the question. At this point I do have a changing viewpoint,? he said, adding an article in the Harvard Business Review on the ?Rule of Seven? in decision-making, whereby each person added above seven reduces effectiveness by 10 per cent, also held sway on his thinking.

Councillor Tom Mrakas also said his viewpoint had changed after speaking with other communities.

?I think over [the last] three years I have come to the realization this is probably the best thing for the residents and the Town to move forward and it would allow us to have the most efficient and effective governance for our community,? said Councillor Mrakas.

A change of heart, however, was not on the table from Councillor Jeff Thom, who said Aurora has had eight Council members for decades and it is a system which has served the community well.

?More representation, more views and more voices at the table is better, especially as our population grows [to] 80,000 people by 2041, and that is the minimum,? he said. ?The Province and the Federal Government have increased the size of both the Provincial Legislature and the House of Commons over the last few years?and, in my opinion, more representation and more voices at the table is a good thing.

?Concentrating power in a few people and, in my opinion, reducing the elected voices at the table is the wrong way to go.?

He was joined in opposition by Councillor Gaertner, who underscored the low voter turnout in 2014. Aside from that, she contended there is still more ?public work? that needs to be done before moving in this direction.

?This has been a very unusual Council, a great Council in that everybody attends most of the time, but that isn't always the case,? she said. ?If you take it down to six, you might have five or four Councillors and the Mayor making most of the decisions. I think we have to take that into account. I think when the [referendum] question was asked there were no parameters around it. I think a lot of people said, ?Six Councillors? Good, that's going to save us some money! I don't know if that is the truth or not, but it is something I did hear from a lot of people. I would be in favour of six full time Councillors, but I am not in favour of six part-time Councillors.

?I feel very strongly about not reducing the number of Councillors. I know I am in a minority here, but I have been around for a long

time. In my opinion, that best serves the municipality.?

Those who supported shrinking Council size, on the other hand, said these details can be worked out as time moves on.

Councillor John Abel, for instance, said compensation and moving towards a ward system are still on the table, but it is Council's duty to move forward.

I am very comfortable moving forward into the new year with six, said Councillor Abel. I think it is our role to set the table for the next term. There are a number of reasons I am in favour of it, but I do believe we will be better served if we can make it a little more competitive and offer a little more compensation, and also if everyone has a ward system I think our residents would be better served.?