

Hybrid Council meetings will continue post-pandemic

The global pandemic changed our world as people found new and creative ways to maintain a business-as-usual mentality.

Programs once held in-person shifted to virtual platforms, new models of delivering services were adopted and, as things gradually began the process of returning to normal, these new flexible paths forward led to quick adaptation as public health restrictions shifted.

One such change at the local level was moving Council meetings online.

Since restriction have eased, Aurora Council has been operating in a hybrid model with most Council members returning to Council chambers to conduct the Town's business with members of the public able to delegate in-person or over zoom.

This hybrid model is set to continue well into the future as the Town looks at what was achieved during the pandemic and what might be the norm in a post-pandemic world.

?The Town's goal from the onset of the pandemic was to continue to maintain and offer programs and services to residents to maintain continued quality of life and livelihood while ensuring the health and safety of the community and staff,? said Carley Smith, Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town of Aurora, in a post-pandemic wrap-up report presented to Council last week.

?The Town continued to manage taxpayer dollars efficiently, including taking advantage of all grant opportunities in its successful management of COVID-19's financial pressures. Financial Management Services assisted its departmental clients in the identification of their COVID-19 driven financial pressures, as well as their identification of mitigating cost savings and alternative funding solutions in support of their continued delivery of services. The Town introduced the Patio Extension Program (over 25 patios in 2021) and partnered with the Aurora Chamber of Commerce on the Shop Local/Emerging Aurora campaign [and] the Town revitalized Machell's Alley to support downtown local businesses.?

At Town Hall, many in-person services were shifted to digital channels, as were popular recreation programs like cooking, creative projects, exercise and fitness, while ice pads were up and running as soon as possible for residents looking to skate.

?The Town was routinely one of the first municipalities in the Region to re-open recreation facilities and indoor pools for programs and rentals, enabling a quick return to play for many community sport organizations,? said Ms. Smith. ?Access Aurora was deemed essential and continued to accommodate in-person appointments for payments, commissioning documents, marriage licenses, burial permits, etc., with added safety measures in place.

?During the early stages of the pandemic, Town staff ensured that the business of Council could continue, while maintaining the ability of the public to safely participate through the successful launch of virtual Council meetings. This would later evolve to hybrid meetings, where Council, residents and staff can join and participate in Council meetings from anywhere they have an internet connection. Hybrid Council meetings will continue post-pandemic as they offer a higher level of accessibility and convenience for Aurora residents wishing to partake in the democratic process.?

The continuation of hybrid meetings was received warmly by Council members who agreed that it improves accessibility for all residents.

?Although a lot of residents complained or were disappointed that they couldn't come to the Council chamber in person I think what it says in the report is true. It is hard for some people to come out to meetings, especially those with accessibility issues, so?I am very, very glad to see that in the report. I am glad that we're doing this and I would love to hear from staff through the coming months if we actually have any residents saying how happy they are that we are continuing these virtual meetings.?

Councillor Michael Thompson was also looking for more information from Town Staff, but in different areas. While Ms. Smith's report touted many achievements made by municipal staff throughout the pandemic, he said more information was needed to validate some of these assertions around being more effective or being as effective prior to the pandemic.

While CAO Doug Nadorozny said some of these areas would be difficult to quantify, Councillor Thompson said working from home is not for everyone and hybrid workplace models have brought forward some unforeseen challenges.

As part of the conversation in terms of how the plans to manage going forward is perhaps some of those checks and balances from a leadership perspective we're implementing to ensure that it is working well for those who are choosing to do that [and] for those who may be struggling there are always ways to identify them and figure out why.

The hybrid model is still an emerging model and I have seen a number of articles and things written about some of the new challenges that are coming into place as part of this hybrid model [we hadn't anticipated], things like WSIB claims when things happen in the household, to wanting to be having a proper office and looking to the employer to provide desks, chairs, and those kinds of equipment, to even questions around overtime. There's this whole new realm of issues or concerns that are kind of emanating out of this hybrid model that a lot of different organizations are now dealing with.

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