

IN GOOD COMPANY: Decisions, decisions...

By Mayor Geoffrey Dawe

It is hard to believe that my last column was back in July!

Summer always seems to be fleeting and quickly we are back to business in September.

With committees and Council back in full-swing, there has been some discussion lately on how our Council makes decisions. For those not familiar with the process, this is a great opportunity to discuss how things get done at Town Hall.

There is a hierarchy to the decision-making process: Consensus, Informed Agreement, Majority and Unilateral.

Viewing these inversely, Unilateral is one-sided decision-making that is common in the United States at the municipal level, where the 'strong Mayor' system is in place. In this system, the business of governing is often referenced as 'the Mayor's agenda' or 'the mayor's administration.' A vocal proponent of this system has been Councillor Doug Ford in the City of Toronto, arguing that Mayor Rob Ford should have the ability to veto the decisions of council.

Majority is where more than 50 per cent agree on a decision. In the case of Aurora Town Council, that would be five of the nine voting members, including the Mayor. This model permits dissenting opinion.

Informed Agreement is subtly different from the Majority model. Decisions are made based on researching, understanding and working with interested parties to come to an objective decision. This typically takes a great deal of work, with much patience and empathy.

Finally, consensus is where all the parties debate an issue until they all agree. Commonly found in First Nations' culture, everyone involved must be completely committed to moving the process forward and demonstrate a willingness to go along with someone else's position.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these models. Unilateral is very expedient but entails the risk of ignoring valid ideas to satisfy a political agenda. Consensus places value on full participation but is very difficult to achieve.

My own belief system is closest aligned with Informed Agreement. It's why I entered politics from the private sector and frankly, it's why we are elected. My experience is that bringing people together to hear all sides of an issue, get a full understanding of the various perspectives, and make decisions based on this dynamic, yields the best results.

However, this is not the system we have.

We have a majority system. While this is entirely democratic, it has the failing that people can vote against something based on little more than a personal agenda, dislike of a fellow Councillor, perceived slights or at worst, revenge.

It also has the unfortunate side-effect of lingering hostility. This often takes the form of Letters to the Editor criticizing the way some people vote on an issue, if not an outright personal attack on that person's integrity or judgement.

In essence, instead of intelligent discussion, you get sour grapes.

I respect the right of Councillors to voice their opinions. Having diverse opinions at the Council table is a good thing. We all come from different backgrounds and we bring a unique perspective to debates.

I have had my position overruled by a majority vote. In a process where everyone gets an equal say, I fully accept this eventuality. I respect the system and those who participate in that system. It is out of this sense of respect that I have never publicly criticized a decision by this Council or a fellow Councillor.

Others may not share this perspective, but I have always felt that respectful discourse is preferable to public attacks.

On a lighter note, I would like to thank our Aurora 150 Committee for all the work they have done over the past several months to plan and deliver four special events to commemorate our sesquicentennial. The Cultural Celebration this past weekend was a fitting send-off to a campaign that celebrated our past, present and future. As this initiative comes to a close, Aurorans can take pride in this memorable series of events, worthy of our special anniversary.

I would also like to thank Councillor Michael Thompson for bringing forward the idea of celebrating our long-standing businesses. Successful businesses underpin the health and welfare of our community. It is entirely fitting that we commemorate the hard work and fortitude of our business owners, who have given so much to our community.

As a final note, I would like to congratulate all our award recipients at the Community Recognition Award ceremony, which took place last week at the Aurora Seniors' Centre. It was a wonderful evening that was a fitting testament to the great work of these community volunteers.