Internet voting decision put on the backburner

By Brock Weir

Local lawmakers have given themselves a few more weeks to decide how Aurorans will cast their vote in next year's municipal election.

Council last week approved a motion confirming Aurora will be using an ?alternative voting method? in the upcoming election ? but the door is still open on just what the alternative method will ultimately be.

Aurora currently uses a paper ballot counted with a tabulation machine ? recognized by the Province as an ?alternative? method to a traditional hand-counted paper ballot seen in a Federal election. Last Tuesday's decision gives municipal staff until May 16 to find answers to questions posed by Council and gives Council itself a deadline of May 23 to come up with a final decision.

The majority of questions surround the pros and cons of implementing an internet-only voting system, which was recommended to Council by Aurora's Governance Committee. It is an issue that has divided Council and sparked heated debate.

The internet voting model had been voted down at the previous week's General Committee meeting but, as Council members did not suggest an alternative, the majority of the arguments were rehashed at the Council level.

Councillor Jeff Thom was once again among those arguing most passionately against a move away from a traditional ballot. Citing recommendations against internet voting made in jurisdictions as varied as British Columbia, Edmonton and Toronto, he said the risks of implementing internet voting outweigh the benefits.

?There are many other reports and articles that cast similar doubts on the desirability of internet voting at this time,? said Councillor Thom. ?For me, the main concern is the security and integrity of the election result. This is important stuff we're talking about here. If we're going to be making a significant change, we should have the information and it should be done right. At this time, I have not seen that evidence and staff have not comforted me with their answers on what we're going to get back [with a delay.]?

Councillor Paul Pirri offered similar concerns. As internet voting does not necessarily mean a reduction of costs to the system or increased voter turnout, he said he had not yet seen ?what problem it is solving.?

?I haven't identified whether that trade-off is an increased risk. With that said, I am happy to look for more information here. That is not an issue. But, for me, when we get a further report, if you could please explain to me what problem needs fixing? To be honest, even if it is a minute increase in risk, I am not sure if the convenience of being able to go out once every four years and being able to vote from your pyjamas at home. Progress for progress's sake alone? I am not sure this is progress. I am not sure what the problem is we're solving.?

For those in support of moving ahead with internet voting, one particular problem it would solve is accessibility challenges faced by many demographics ? disabled to seniors ? in getting out in casting their ballot.

?For me, the most important thing is to make voting easier and, from my perspective, it's the individuals who can't get to the voting polls for accessibility issues, people who can't leave their homes,? said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. ?For me, if there is an easier way for individuals to participate in the right to vote, I would like to have more information on that.?

Similar sentiments were shared by Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said improving residents' quality of life is part of Aurora's Strategic Plan and this fits the bill.

?The benefit is for those voters with disabilities; to be able to overcome those barriers and exercise their constitutional right to vote and dignity,? he said. ?That is the benefit. We strive under our strategic plan to look to improve and provide ?an exceptional quality of life' to our residents. Well, I think that is a benefit and that is improving the quality of life for the residents of our Town. That is why I think this is important for us to move forward. It is not just because we're progressing and moving forward, it is about doing it to improve the quality of life for our residents and that is what we're supposed to be doing here.

?At the end of the day there are risks any which way we vote. If we sit here and wait until we get to 100 per cent we're going to be waiting longer to institute online voting compared to how long it has taken to do Library Square. It is the right thing to do for the quality of life for our residents.?

In the end, Council was content for a cooling off period to get more information, yet just what that information might be is the big question. Possible clarity came near the end of the Council meeting when Councillor Mrakas suggested an invitation be extended to someone from the City of Markham, which has an internet-based system, to come and speak about why the city moved in that direction.

When Councillor Thom suggested such a delegation be balanced by a representative from a municipality opposing internet voting, Councillor Mrakas pulled his motion.

?We established a Governance Review Committee and asked them to look at a variety of issues and advise us, provide some feedback,? offered Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I am pretty confident that within the confines of those committee meetings they were raising the same questions that we are tonight with regards to security and regards to costs and benefits, yet somehow they came to that recommendation.?