

Local pot store could be up in smoke before it even happens

By Brock Weir

Ontario will roll out a series of LCBO-style stores next year to sell recreational marijuana, and while locations for these stores have not yet been revealed, Aurora is exploring options to nip a local store in the bud.

Council last week signed off on a motion from Mayor Geoff Dawe calling on staff to investigate the possibility of an 'opt-out' provision within the Province's plans, which could effectively provide communities with the mechanism to block a recreational marijuana store from setting up shop.

As things stand now, the Province plans to open 40 stores by next July, with a further 80 stores the following year, and 150 stores in 2020.

If Aurora is not among the first wave in 2018, opting out could be up to you; Council is leaving the door open to opting out being a referendum question in next year's municipal election.

The first 40 locations are still hazy at the moment, but opting out is an option worth exploring, said Mayor Dawe in support of his motion.

'This is to simply ask our staff what would the provision be, how that would work, and is there any effect on us?' he said. 'I think it is an opportunity for us and the residents to see if they are interested in having a store here. It is an opportunity for us to investigate how it may occur.'

Councillor Michael Thompson also voiced his support of, at the very least, exploring all the possibilities but said it could pose difficulties down the road if the lines are blurred between recreation and medicinal cannabis use.

'From my understanding, there is a possibility that they may branch out into oils or other aspects of which might be considered medicinal,' said Councillor Thompson. 'I think it is important for staff that while we understand the focus is recreational, what happens if the stores offer a wide variety of products and some might be medicinal?'

Councillor Thompson wasn't alone in tempering his support for the motion with reservations. Councillor Paul Pirri, for instance, questioned the wholesale point of the motion.

'If we're going to have staff keep this on the radar, I don't see what the problem is of having them keep this on our radar, but I don't see what this would accomplish if we did opt out,' he said.

His point resonated with Councillor Thompson, with the latter adding, 'there needs to be a clear understanding of why we have chosen this direction. For now, I am happy to support getting all the information. I am sure we will have lots of questions, but once that report comes, part of the report should be what are the reasons for doing so?'

Others, however, expressed very firm opinions on the future of retail recreational marijuana stores in Aurora, chief among them Councillor Jeff Thom.

Building on questions posed earlier in the evening by Councillor John Abel on potential revenues the Province and Feds might generate from such enterprise, Councillor Thom said opting out could see a financial hit here at home.

'I think [this motion] sends a signal that we're asking staff to investigate the options of opting out,' he said. 'If stores are open in Newmarket, Stouffville, Richmond Hill? they will get the jobs and the economic activity from these stores being open and Aurora won't. Our residents, who are looking to buy the products being sold in these stores will just go to another Town and patronize the stores there.'

'I would rather the report come back on the legalization and the Provincial regulations around marijuana without indicating we were looking at just the opt-out aspect of it. Regardless [of what you think about recreational cannabis] we're moving towards legalization, the Province has put forward their regulatory framework, so I think the signal should be that if these places are going to be operational, and the Province is going to go forward with this, I think we should have the store.'

'I would much rather see Aurora have recreational cannabis as being sold under the Provincial framework than Richmond Hill, King, Vaughan, Newmarket and we opt out. The Town of Aurora has three or four liquor store and a couple of beer stores. I am not sure everyone in Aurora drinks alcohol yet we have no opt-outs for those substances.'

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Should Aurora opt out of having an LCBO-style recreational marijuana store? Would a store have a positive or negative impact on the local economy? Send your thoughts to letters@auroran.com