

Opting out favoured by delegates, but not by all



By Brock Weir

Council Chambers were filled to capacity on Monday night as residents descended on Town Hall to hear local lawmakers' decision on whether Aurora would opt in or out on allowing retail cannabis sales.

While Council ultimately voted to opt in, a clear majority of residents who took the time to speak at the podium were very much against the move.

27 members of the public came out to state their case and just six of these individuals spoke in favour of opting in.

'We have collected more than 1,600 signatures urging Council to opt out,' said Edmund Yeung, who questioned the economic benefits that opting in would bring to a municipality like Aurora. 'The Federal Government only expects excise tax to be around \$100 million for the first two years, which means no excise money for us. Toronto will get 114 times our funding. Please do not use the term 'financial benefits' easily. I used to teach business school at the MBA level more than 20 years ago, but the math is very simple.'

Mr. Yeung went on to question whether opting in would achieve the results of 'eliminating' the black market, stating there were many uncertainties still surrounding regulations.

'Yes, [cannabis] is legal now. You can buy online and enjoy it at home. The Ontario Government has not provided municipalities the ability to control locations and a lot of other things. There are so many uncertainties about opting in at this point. Once we opt in, we're stuck with the unknown consequences and the irreversibility. Let's be responsible and opt out at this point.'

'Councillors, if citizens have made references to this report, we expect you to make compelling and clear justification if you want to opt in. More than 1,600 of your constituents have spoken and we have voted to opt out. I doubt if anyone would have done a more comprehensive personal poll.'

The youngest person in the Council Chamber Monday night was 13-year-old Grade 6 student Sean Zhang. He spoke against opting in, asking Council members to weigh in the impact allowing retail cannabis sales might have on himself and his younger sister.

'We all know that cannabis is legalized in Canada, but it doesn't mean we should encourage younger people to try and use recreational cannabis by opening cannabis stores in Aurora. If we are going to give youth a more convenient way to obtain the cannabis, a larger amount of them will be risking their safety.'

With Richmond Hill, Newmarket and Markham opting out at the time of the meeting and Vaughan following suit as Aurora's meeting went on, Aurora could become a destination for cannabis buyers, he added, noting that while provisions ban a cannabis outlet from being within 150 metres of schools, the same restrictions are not in place for any other youth destinations like day care and community centres.

'Why go into a store with cannabis when you can just purchase it online,' he asked. 'It's faster and it's safer for youth since you don't need a credit card to purchase. We should definitely opt out of cannabis stores for a healthier future for our youth.'

This was a position shared by mother-of-three, Erclan Ma, who said she was concerned about the temptation kids might face from retail cannabis sales.

'I want my voice to be heard. I don't want to see the cannabis stores in Aurora,' she said, stating she cherishes the time she spends with her kids at places like Tim Hortons and Dairy Queen after they finish school, sports and extra-curriculars. 'If my children [see

these stores] they will take it for granted. It is just a matter of time before they are 19 years old. As a mother, I want to protect my children, but society has such a big impact. I love Aurora, I care about the economy, but I also care about the future of this Town, so please opt out.?

Fellow mom-of-three Laura Schaffer said she too was concerned about her children, but this concern translated into firm support of opting in.

Ms. Schaffer told Council she didn't come to the meeting with the intention of speaking, but felt compelled to speak about her journey with her son who lives with epilepsy.

?He was diagnosed at the age of five years old and was drug resistant for a very long time,? she said, adding that if cannabis had been available at that time, they could have followed a very different route, but getting medical-grade product was next to impossible. ?Currently my son is addicted to medication and it is not marijuana. He has been on medications that have made him lose his speech. Marijuana wouldn't make him lose his speech; he's been on medications that have caused rage and anger and have changed his personality. Marijuana would not do that to him.

?This is about lab-tested, medical-grade marijuana we're looking at and everyone is so concerned about their children, so am I. I am concerned about my children too. I am concerned about their wellbeing and what we do for them and for their future. I have three kids, I have been a resident of Aurora for eleven years, and I don't believe in any way this will change whether or not a child is going to go and pick and choose to do marijuana. They will do it if they want to, whether it is available to them legally or not legally, or easily available.?