

Pay hike sparks debate around Council table

Council could approve a pay raise for itself this week, following a contentious debate at October 17's General Committee meeting.

If approved, Mayor Tom Mrakas will see his municipal salary rise from \$96,200 per year to the 76th percentile of market comparators (estimated to come out to an increase of \$9,000 to \$12,000 more per year. Councillors, who currently make approximately \$38,000 per year, a figure which has been indexed almost annually since 2018 (2021 excepted) boosted to \$52,000.

Should these changes be ratified at this week's Council meeting, pay will be made retroactive to the start of this Council term and be funded from Council's tax rate stabilization reserve rather than directly on the taxpayer, until 2025. The Auroran, however, understands an amendment to take the retroactive adjustment off the table was due to be made after this week's press deadline.

Council members gave tentative approval to the wage increase last week, with Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, who proposed a series of small tweaks that were ultimately accepted by the majority, stressing that these recommendations came from the Town's Council Compensation Review Committee.

Those in favour of the pay raise said it was an uncomfortable position to be in as Council compensation for an incoming term is typically set at the end of the outgoing term of Council, but agreed the proposed salary it was fair for the work they do.

Vocal opposition, however, came from Mayor Tom Mrakas who said, given affordability concerns across the board, this was not the time for a pay raise.

The Committee recommended compensation be in line with Newmarket, said Councillor Gallo, presenting a series of slides on the recommendations. The intent was to at least bring the Council compensation equal to across-the-board market, but specifically [with] what happens in Newmarket.

This isn't the way to do it, but I am trying to set things right, he added, noting the timing of the report coming nearly a year since the current Council came to office. I am sure the spotlight is on me but I tried my best to show the slides and give the data to defend why what I am putting forward is not that different than what the recommendations out of the Committee were. I strongly believe had this been done last term or this term, I can't imagine the numbers would have been that different. I think part of the benefit to this is it won't hit the tax base until at least 2025, half of it. To me, the general idea, which was born out of the Committee, was to bring it up to a level that is, I believe, responsible, but [comparable] to someone like Newmarket and many other municipalities that are equal to us. I am sure I will be coined as 'the classic politician that just wants to give themselves a raise,' but I hope I have done the Committee justice and the reporting out of that to identify why this is necessary.

Speaking in favour of the recommendations, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland went deeper into comparisons to other municipalities, noting that in some cases elsewhere Council members have assistants, something that is not the case in Aurora. There is value, she said, in looking at the workload shouldered by each elected member.

They are a little bit shocked by that, said Councillor Gilliland of when residents ask how much Council members currently make, adding compensation for elected members hasn't been revised since 2017. This would be a correction, and we also didn't go down from 8 to 6 Councillors (in the 2018 election) without any kind of pay increase with that workload, so there was a savings of two Councillors on top of that which wasn't taken into consideration in this, so I don't think we're far off from the starting point.

Workload has long been a concern for Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who has previously argued that Aurora's Council positions should be considered full-time jobs.

While she too said she had an issue with the timing of the report and the recommendations, she ultimately supported what was before her.

'This should not be a political topic and we're faced with that, although I have to say the Committee was arm's length from Council and they did their work,' she said. 'I think it needs to be in Bylaw so this (timing) never gets overlooked again because it is not a good position for us to be in. Sometimes a resident will say to me, 'I didn't want to disturb you at your office?' and we don't have an office. We have two desks and I have long thought that the work I do has been undervalued and I feel that this motion represents how a Councillor should be treated with respect.'

Vocal support also came from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, with the latter stating that it was a matter of pay equity.

'My view is if you're going to pay for a role, there is such a thing as pay equity' or you make it a volunteer position and make Councillors get paid zero. I would be more comfortable with being paid zero than being paid something far less than what is a comparator across the same ministry,' he said.

While he said he understood the issue of timing and public perception, he said Aurora Councillors have been 'underpaid significantly' compared to similarly-sized and structured municipalities.

'For me, it is about principle and pay equity,' he continued. 'In politics, there might be a tradition that any pay increase starts the following term to avoid that negative public perception, but I don't see how moving from \$37,000 to something higher is a negative image perception. I think if you were to ask most members of the public and they asked how much you got paid, I think most people would be surprised how low it is and I share it all the time to anyone who asks.'

The Mayor's pay, in his view, was 'drastically underpaid based on the time he commits.'

Mayor Mrakas, however, said he disagreed with the recommendations and, at last week's meeting, was the only one to do so. Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who chaired the meeting, did not weigh in.

'I have no issue if this was done as a normal process, which would be to approve this and to have this beginning in the next term. I do have an issue with this looking at it being extended or implemented during this budget, but also retroactive to the beginning of the term,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'I have heard about the fact that we didn't do it last term. Yeah, there was a thing called COVID last term and we all sat here at the table and we didn't take a cost-of-living increase as well because we wanted to ensure we weren't putting extra pressure not only on our budget but the residents of our community.'

He added that he didn't hear anyone in the last election cycle say, 'Hey, Council is not getting paid enough.'

'I am actually shocked that some at this table considering [a raise] hearing about the fact we have high interest rates, high inflation, that residents are having problems buying groceries, can't afford their mortgages, and yet we want to take money that this isn't for building a facility, it isn't for a service for our residents to do better, to add value ' this is getting tax money and putting it straight into the pockets of the people sitting around this table immediately. I am opposed to it.'

As the debate continued, Councillor Gilliland told Mayor Mrakas this was 'an opportunity for you to put something forward that you'd prefer.'

'I think your Council members would want to hear your thoughts on that,' she said.

'I am opposed to this entire thing that is in front of us,' he replied. 'I will continue to oppose it regardless of whether it is the 55th or the 60th percentile. I don't think we should be doing a retroactive increase. I disagree with the fact we're going to be burdening the taxpayers, the residents of our community, and not waiting until next year.'

Councillor Gallo concluded his views by stressing this was 'not a Mayor Mrakas thing for me, it's the position of the Mayor that

deserves it.?

Should the recommendations approved at General Committee be ratified this week unchanged, Councillors will also see their annual vehicle allowance raised to \$7,000, be allowed participation in the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS) pension plan, participation in health and dental group benefits at the cost of the Town, severance for Mayor and Council increased to one month per year of service to a maximum of twelve months.

This will be funded completely from the Tax Rate Stabilization Fund in 2023 and 2024 before things change in 2025. In that year, the raise will be shared 50 per cent by the reserve and 50 by the taxpayers. The impacts will be solely born by the tax rate beginning in 2026.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter