

Question on ward system referendum approved by Council

By Brock Weir

Are you in favour of electing all Aurora councillors, other than the Mayor, by ward vote instead of general Town-wide vote?

That is the exact question you will be asked on your municipal election ballot this October.

Councillors approved the wording of this question, as well as a second question on whether you would be in favour of reducing the number of Councillors from the current eight to six at a special Council meeting on Monday night.

With Council's approval, the two questions will be on this fall's municipal election ballot. For the results to be binding in favour of a ward system, at least 50 per cent of eligible voters need to turn out to the polls, and the majority of these voters would have to be in favour of splitting into wards.

If these thresholds are met, Council will have 180 days to make the first steps to implement the ward system, according to Town Solicitor Warren Mar. The change will be effective for 2018.

If less than 50 per cent of voters turn out, but the majority show they are in favour of a ward system, Council could move on its own to follow the will of the voters.

"This is one of the most important questions members of our community have to answer themselves," said Councillor Paul Pirri, who got the ball rolling in this Council term on putting the question to voters. "I do not believe it is appropriate for us to be answering that for them in this venue."

Although Councillors largely conceded that meeting the 50 per cent voter threshold would be a rarity, considering Aurora's highest voter turnout in recent years was 41 per cent, a referendum question could motivate more people to cast their ballot.

"I think it is an opportunity to engage the public in a different way and maybe get the voter turnout up," said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe.

If thresholds are not met, Councillors said they would take comfort in the fact they would still get a good read of whether or not Aurora wanted to move to a ward system if it is left up to them to make the decision.

"While I am hopeful we will get more than 50 per cent, I am not convinced of that and will be elated if that happened," said Councillor John Gallo. "I see this as an opportunity to survey the residents on their opinion of these two subjects."

Underlying the entire discussion was the issue of making sure each voter had enough information before them to make an informed decision. This was a universal concern of Council, who said a communication plan on the options, including the pros and cons of adopting a ward system, is paramount.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, said clarity in the education could be provided on why there is a question to reduce Council from eight to six, and whether or not that could potentially save money for taxpayers.

Outreach and input was also key to the eleven members of the public who turned out for Monday's meeting, including two declared candidates for Council. First up to speak was Anthony Pullano, a vocal proponent of adopting a ward system.

He "applauded" Council for making a decision on the question and said salaries should be addressed later. He had praise for Council saying they were all doing a "great job" with the resources and time they are given, but said they should be bumped up to full-time positions with salaries of \$60,000 - \$70,000 (part time Councillors currently earn \$27,567 for the year) and be afforded their own offices and staff.

?We have to make a decision,? Mr. Pullano told Councillors on the ward system. ?We have to take the bull by the horn and you have to lead.?

Also speaking in favour of a ward system was Marie Leone, who said she was disappointed that discussions over a ward system for the better part of a decade left her with the impression Council ?decided we weren't bright enough to make our own decisions.?

?If Aurora says [we] don't want a ward system, I think that is pretty good and it puts it to bed for a while,? she said. ?When I have a problem, I always go to the Mayor. He always answers my questions and takes care of things, but I would like to know I have someone who is interested in my community, in my comments, and who actually comes and knocks on my door once in a while.

?I will be happy with whatever decision Aurora makes because that is what they want.?