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Questions still need to be answered on retail pot, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

Aurora will host a Special Council meeting next Monday, January 21, to decide whether or not to allow retail cannabis sales within the Town.

As The Auroran reported last week, the decision will come down to the wire as municipalities have until January 22 to opt in or opt out, but some Councillors say there are still many questions that need to be answered at the Special Council meeting for them to make an informed decision.

?Whether one likes it or not, it is important that we recognize cannabis is now a legal product and Aurorans have access to legally purchase cannabis online via the OCS (Ontario Cannabis Store),? says Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ?The Town of Aurora has thankfully been given more time than others to do more research and observe other municipalities go through the same process of deciding whether or not to opt in or opt out of allowing cannabis retail and I, for one, am still researching and asking questions to help make the best decision for our Town.

?For me, the key factors are public health, enforcement and regulation and Council will be meeting with York Regional Police shortly to gather more information. I would like to know if there are potential risks around illegal sales if we opt out. Will our enforcement costs go up? Is it safer for the public to have a controlled retail environment? I also look forward to hearing more from the public to understand their concerns, issues and/or support.?

Councillor Sandra Humfryes is also looking forward to getting more information from both York Regional Police in the days ahead, as well as from the public in the lead-up to ? and at ? the January 21 meeting.

Over the course of the 2018 Municipal Election campaign, Councillor Humfryes said the vast majority of the people she spoke at the door were in favour of opting out but, over the last few weeks, the tide has started to turn.

?The majority of people were asking to opt out, but that was back in October and November and there have been some developments,? says Councillor Humfryes. ?There is the argument that we have liquor stores and you can go and buy cigarettes and alcohol and I am seeing a different viewpoint in the last few weeks with people saying, ?If we can go to neighbouring municipalities or Toronto and still get it, why can't we get it here at home? It is legal, so why should we opt out?'?

The ?problem? with cannabis, she says, is that people still have the idea that people use it simply to get high but, she says, people are increasingly using it for different reasons, whether it is ?for pain, for ways of functioning or focusing.?

?It is totally different and I feel people need it and we should support that use for them,? she adds. ?I worry a little bit for the youth and they have to get the right view of what it is for.?

In the lead-up to the January 21 meeting, Councillor Humfryes says she is looking forward to receiving more input from the public, seeing the results of public surveys the Town has been conducting and getting a feel for the majority.

?I will go that route, however there is still a part of me that doesn't think we're ready for it in our Town just yet,? she concedes, ?but I don't want to have some missed opportunities with tax benefits and opportunities for small businesses to take advantage of this.?

What has been missing from the dialogue, she adds, is information from the upper levels of government on just how the retail environment will be ?managed? while municipalities ?are just reaping the benefits, or not.?

?The public needs to have more information on how these retail stores will be regulated with health inspections and everything else,? she says. ?It will be a very regulated environment. There is a lot more to be done before January 21 and then we will be in a better position to see where Aurora wants to be. We need to hear more, listen more, hear what the residents have to say and make a final decision.?

Also on the fence is Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Although she says she's received just a few emails on the subject, on top of one in-person conversation and one voice mail, the comments she's heard so far on retail cannabis have been mixed.

?I have to do what the residents want,? she says. ?I think there are more people who don't want it, but I've had about seven emails, one voicemail and one [conversation] in person, so it has been very hard to judge [so far]. I think, and rightly so, that there have been a lot of emotional responses, but I am looking for facts and I am looking for information that will point me to something that is right for the community or wrong for the community. So far, I don't have, that and you have to do what the community wants.?

The Special Council Meeting on whether to opt in or opt out of retail cannabis sales will take place in Council Chambers on Monday, January 21, at 7 p.m. The meeting is open to the public.?