

Should Aurora split into wards? That will be your call in 2014

By Brock Weir

Next year's municipal election will do more than just elect mayor and council, it could very well change the face of Aurora councils to come.

Aurora Council approved adding two questions on the 2014 Municipal Ballot. The first will ask voters whether they would like to see a ward system implemented in Aurora, and the second will see whether Aurorans want the current eight member Council knocked down to six, plus the Mayor.

Aurora currently operates as an 'at large' system where eight Councillors are elected to join the Mayor at Town Hall to represent the interests of the entire community 'at large.' A ward system would divide Aurora up into sections which would each be represented by one individual Councillor.

Although incumbent members of Council were more circumspect in their opinions on whether they are personally in favour of a ward system, the majority voted in favour of the questions to give the public the right to decide.

'I believe residents should have the right to choose that,' said Councillor Paul Pirri, who made the motion earlier this year to put the questions on the ballot. 'The ward system is something we have talked about at length and has been brought up at a few different elections.'

Although Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he was not in favour of a ward system as it could lead to Aurora becoming 'too parochial', he said he had no problem in going out and asking the voters what they think.

The motion was approved 6 - 2 with Councillors John Gallo and Michael Thompson voting against the motion. Councillor Evelyn Buck was absent from the meeting.

For Councillor Thompson, the two possible questions on the ballot did not provide the specifics needed to make a decision. Instead, he proposed a governance committee to look at how Council operates overall, not limited to wards or size.

'You can say we start background in January and we will have that all fleshed out in June just before the election but we're starting this process so late and with very little information,' said Councillor Thompson. 'We have a concept but not all the details.'

'[A question] has to be clear, concise and specific. This is not clear and concise. It is not educating the voter on how many wards and what are the implications.'

Numbers, not details were at issue for Councillor John Gallo. For any decisions on implementing a ward system or reducing the number of Councillors, at least 50 per cent of eligible voters need to turn out to the polls to vote in favour. With Aurora's voter turnout hovering between 38 and 39 per cent in the last two elections, getting the required numbers seems like a remote possibility.

'If the point is to get a sense of what the public feels towards these issues, then based on voter turnout I am not sure this is the best way to do it,' he said.

This was a view shared by other Councillors although they ultimately voted to give the question a good shake.

'It's most likely we would never get the 50 per cent of the population out to vote, which is unfortunate,' said Councillor Chris Ballard. 'I like where this is going in terms of looking at the governance model of this Town, but I think we need to lay the groundwork first.'

?I don't want to rush to put an issue on the ballot. I would suggest looking at some discussion, some basic research, and how we can engage voters over the next nine months.?

According to John Leach, whether or not Aurora gets the numbers, Council will be bound and obligated to do one of two things. If the 50 per cent threshold is reached, Council will have to do ?everything in its power? to make the changes a reality. If they don't, Council is barred from doing anything related to the two questions for the following four years.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day, community engagement was key ? whether these questions ultimately stimulate that engagement or not.

?What I find is disinterest in municipal politics,? said Councillor Ballard. ?What I have found in talking to Councillors from communities where they do have a ward system that the Councillors really focused on their ward. That, perhaps, helps with voter interest and municipal interest.?

Added Councillor John Abel: ?I have had people ask me about [a ward system] once or twice. You can see some Councillors do more in the community than others, but that all turns out when you go for re-election. I see?this has been brought up at every Council in the last three or four years. They have tried to gather interest and they have tried to stimulate some sort of reaction.?