

## Special Council meeting planned to consider referendum on ward system

**By Brock Weir**

A special Council meeting is slated for next Monday, March 24 to consider the future of a ward system in Aurora.

Following Council's decision last fall to ask residents on this October's Municipal Election ballot whether they would like to see a ward system implemented in Aurora, and whether Council should be reduced from the current complement of eight Councillors to six, plus the Mayor, next week's meeting is intended to fine tune and formalize just what you, the Aurora voters, will be asked.

Once the wording is confirmed at this meeting, a public notification will then be followed and the question will be formalized by a bylaw at Council on April 22.

In discussing the Special Council Meeting at the Committee level last week, Councillors said they were concerned that Aurora residents are given the full implications of the pros and cons of a ward system, where Aurora would be divided up into either eight or six wards represented by an individual Councillor, versus the current 'at large' system where the Mayor and eight Councillors are elected to represent the interests of the town as a whole.

'If we're going to ask the public to make a decision on any question [they] need to be well-informed about the implications of both sides of the question,' said Councillor Michael Thompson.

Although Monday's meeting is simply to discuss what the questions will be, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was concerned there wasn't enough time for public notification.

'I don't really think the public understands this well,' she said. 'I don't know how the rest of Council feels, but I have concern with that date.'

Once the questions are decided, it will then be up to municipal staff to devise a plan on how to best communicate with residents on a non-partisan basis, to outline the ins and outs of a ward system versus the current 'at large' model.

'The election team would have to discuss it with communications and work out a plan to distribute information in a non-partisan fashion about the fact there may be two questions on the ballot,' said Town Solicitor Warren Mar, in his capacity as acting Town Clerk. 'It would depend on what Council approves as a question, if it were to move forward, and that is something we would have to investigate further.'

During last week's meeting, Councillor John Abel questioned the formality of such a meeting, asking whether Council could simply pass a resolution to implement a ward system. Theoretically Council could do just that, said Mr. Mar, but the Municipal Act requires at least one public meeting dedicated to discussing such a change.

'Council, under the Act, could divide the municipality into wards if it so chose at [their] discretion by a bylaw, but this meeting is to discuss [a motion by Councillor Paul Pirri] to put a question on the ballot to find out whether residents want to move forward with it,' said Mr. Mar.

'[Reversing the vote of the public] would depend on the turnout. We would need 50 per cent of the electorate and 50 per cent would have to vote either yea or nay for it to be somewhat binding. If it is nay, it is a four year waiting period before anything else could be done. If it is yea, Council is obligated under the act to take action as soon as possible to make the changes requested. If we don't get 50 per cent of the voter turnout and 50 per cent of voting one way or another, it is not a binding referendum under the act.'

For Councillor Paul Pirri, the Councillor who got the ball rolling on this in this particular term of Council, these discussions were venturing away from the topic at hand, which was simply setting a date for a discussion.

?I agree with Councillor Gaertner that [the timing] is not ideal, but I think it is important that we move in this direction right now to make sure that the time is allowed to make sure we can have this as a referendum question. We can have this meeting now and, later on, we can have more educational sessions done. There are other ways we can make this work as well.?