

?Streamlined? Council meetings will increase public understanding, participation

By Brock Weir

A new ?streamlined? Council format, complete with an earlier start time will provide Aurorans with more opportunities to become engaged in the decisions that impact them.

Council is due to approve a new procedural bylaw this week which will implement several changes to the standard format of Council and Committee meetings starting in the beginning of 2017.

These include the use of ?plain language? on Council agendas and reports so members of the public better understand the impact of the decisions that are due to be made, and giving citizens further opportunities to participate in the process.

The changes were outlined at last week's General Committee meeting by Town Clerk Lisa Lyons. The presentation was the culmination of several months of review by Council members and staff looking at how to find ?efficiencies? in the way meetings are conducted.

Should the changes be approved at Council this week, agendas in the new year will be divided up between items on a ?consent agenda? for items which are only included for Council information, and items earmarked for Council direction, eliminating the need for Council members to pull each item separately for discussion.

Before this even gets underway, however, meetings will soon begin each Tuesday at 6.45 p.m., with this first 15 minutes turned over to members of the public to speak to Council on the issues that matter to them before the formal meeting gets underway at 7 p.m.

Currently, meetings begin at 7 p.m., with the first portion of the evening devoted to Open Forum.

?We have taken a plain language approach to ensure the bylaw is clear to the average reader while providing sufficient administrative detail and context,? said Ms. Lyons. ?In the draft procedural bylaw, generally all Closed Session meetings (meetings held out of the public) will be Council meetings?on every Tuesday before General Committee and Council if required.

?The earlier start time will provide for earlier reporting out to the public and an earlier end time for regular meetings that follow. In order to provide transparency, a report on items that were discussed in Closed Session, but are no longer required to remain confidential, will be provided to the public on an annual basis.?

Members of the public will also have a handy way of knowing how each of their elected representatives vote on each issue.

Currently, votes are only recorded by member if specifically requested by the Mayor or a Councillor during the course of a Council discussion.

This system will be a thing of the past as Council moves to implement a new voting system in the New Year which will record every vote taken with the click of a button. The results will then be documented on the Town's website and in the minutes of every meeting.

The electronic voting system is planned to be operational by the January 24 meeting following audio-visual upgrades to the Chamber during the holiday recess.

The draft changes were generally supported at the Committee level last week, with Councillors only suggesting minor revisions.

Among them was changing the start time of Closed Session meetings from a proposed 5.30 p.m. start time to 5.45 p.m. to allow Council members who have day jobs a better chance of getting to the meetings in less of a crunch. However, concerns still remain on whether this will allow sufficient time for Closed Session items to be discussed before Open Forum convenes just an hour later.

A further suggestion from Councillor Paul Pirri to limit Budget deliberations to Saturdays away from the current system blending Monday evening discussions with similar talks in all-day sessions on Saturdays and Mondays was rejected by the Committee.

Daytime sessions on Monday, he said, are particularly tough to make, but others said they saw the value of keeping the status quo.

?We always strive to give people more opportunities to attend our meetings,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?We have them on weekends, we have them on the evenings, and we have them during the weekday so that whenever some of the residents' own personal schedules there is an opportunity. I certainly hear from some members it is a challenge to balance work life, Council life and what is associated with it, but I can't support [the change]. I do believe midday is also an important part of the budget process.?

The suggestion, however, found favour with Councillors Jeff Thom and Tom Mrakas.

?Last year I had to miss [a meeting] and it is unfortunate because you all want to have your say and participate in the process, but because it is a part-time position you have to take into account your work obligations,? said Councillor Thom. ?Typically it is fine, but when you have something blow up at the last minute and you can't attend, it puts us in an awkward position. I feel most people can make Saturdays, Council and members of the public.?

Added Councillor Mrakas: ?I think it is important that all nine of us were sitting here when we're discussing the budget. Even if

we're missing just one person, that doesn't give them the opportunity to speak on behalf of the residents they represent. If that means we have to do it on a Saturday to make sure all of us are here, then I am in favour of that.?

The amendment to do away with Monday budget meetings failed on a tie vote of 4 ? 4 with Councillor Wendy Gaertner unable to attend last week's Committee meeting. The matter is up for further deliberation this week.