

Video conferencing will not be allowed for advisory committees

By Brock Weir

Members of Aurora's advisory committees will not be able to participate in meetings via video conferencing, according to a report before Council this week from Town Solicitor Warren Mar.

The report comes on the heels of a push from Council to investigate whether video conferencing would be allowed under the municipal act in any circumstances. Particularly, their concerns stemmed from committee members with mobility and accessibility challenges who might be more adversely affected by inclement weather and shortcomings in public transit compared to other committee members.

According to Mr. Mar's report, Ontario's Municipal Act 2001 does not cover whether committee members can attend meetings remotely via electronic device, which presents a particular problem.

"Review of the law and municipal authority suggests that it would not be permissible to allow members to attend committee or local board hearings without being physically present at a meeting," reads the report to Council. "Although there does not appear to be any specific prohibition against such a measure, the power to permit such a practice appears to have been specifically omitted as the Legislature does not appear to be ready to grant such authority to municipalities (other than Toronto)."

For some Councillors who addressed the report at last week's General Committee meeting, it was a disappointing result, but one which they had to tackle. In doing so, however, some said they were in favour of looking for alternatives beyond video conferencing which would give committee members every opportunity to participate.

The most prevalent examples last week cited members of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, which debates and advocates for issues around Aurora which might be encountered by people in wheelchairs, who might use mobility devices, or might be experiencing other challenges which would otherwise impede their full participation in society.

"There is only one committee I am having trouble with and that is Accessibility," said Councillor Chris Ballard. "There are members who do have issues if the weather is bad or if they are ill. Probably unlike many of the other committees who have trouble getting there, I would just like to see that members of that Committee are able to attend electronically. I know there are school boards that have similar committees, the same as our Accessibility, where members can join and participate. Obviously, they are governed by different provincial legislation, but I was hoping those two pieces of legislation would be closer to allow our AAC members to attend in inclement weather."

Similar views were also put forward by Councillors John Abel and Councillor Buck, who said they were concerned by these advisory groups often not being able to make quorum due to illness or not being able to reach meetings. Both also said a viable alternative might be in moving a committee, such as the Accessibility Advisory Committee, to the daytime rather than its current 7 p.m. slot so members would be able to use programs such as Mobility Plus to get to Town Hall.

"The AAC has difficulty maintaining quorum, Mobility Plus is not providing their service for evenings and with inclement weather there were pressing needs this virtual solution [may have provided]," said Councillor Abel. "It might be a solution with Mobility Plus if we move the meetings to the daytime."

Added Councillor Buck: "It seems obvious with the research that has been done that Queen's Park has considered and they have rejected it. It is not something they have overlooked. I like Councillor Abel's idea that the Committee should consider whether having daytime meetings would be more conducive for them to get a quorum."