

Voter turnout continues to plummet leaving officials looking at the 'why'?

It was a dismal showing from Aurorans at the polls with just 26.5 per cent of eligible voters casting their ballots in the October 24 municipal election.

An all-time low, the decline in voter turnout is part of a continuing trend in Aurora, and was in steep decline this year.

35.7 per cent of eligible voters turned out to the polls in 2014, for instance, with 2018 figures standing at 32.1 per cent.

Aurora is not unique in this regard; it's a trend that was experienced in many Ontario municipalities last week, leaving those involved in the election itself to question why.

'It is not just an Aurora problem; municipalities all around us had trouble getting it,' said Town Clerk Mike de Rond, who ran the most recent Aurora election with his team. 'It even goes back to the June Provincial Election [where] I think it was a historically low turnout. There definitely seems to be some apathy with elections at the moment. It's certainly disappointing, but not something that is just happening in Aurora.'

For the first time this year, Aurora voters cast their ballot for a Ward Councillor rather than an at-large lawmaker.

In the previous system, Aurorans were able to vote for up to six Council members to represent the community as a whole. This time around, they were voting for a Mayor, plus one Council candidate to represent one of six neighbourhoods.

'It will be interesting to look at a historical case when people go from 'at large' to wards and what that does to turnout,' says de Rond. 'I'm hesitant to read anything into our (voter turnout) going down because of the Ward System or anything like that. I tend to think it is just across the board.'

While de Rond says he was 'disappointed' that just over a quarter of eligible electors cast their vote, tackling this downturn is something 'we're going to look at going forward.'

'We want to make the election as accessible as possible for everyone. I don't have any specific ideas at the moment, but certainly within the York Region Clerks' Group we'll definitely be talking about it over the next four years. We can always make improvements and things like that, so not really as it relates to turnout at the moment. We do our absolute best through our communications channels and even with signs.'

Fresh off the campaign trail, this 'disappointment' was shared by the candidates who ultimately came out on top.

'I always believe we need to engage our community more,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas just after the final votes were tallied on October 24. 'I believe that the more engaged the community is the better informed that they are, the better we are overall as a community. It is disappointing to see the numbers as low as they are, as far as from a percentage perspective, but ultimately sometimes what can we do? We can continue to make sure that we informed the public, continue to get them engaged, and just continue to do that work. That's how we get everyone involved and get them engaged into the democratic process.'

Voter apathy was a concern from Councillor John Gallo in the lead-up to the election itself.

'There was a lot of apathy, to be honest,' he said. 'A lot of people didn't even know there was an election, which is disappointing.'

Similarly, Councillor Michael Thompson said he was 'worried' about voter turnout as he made the rounds.

'I got a lot of [feedback from voters] that things are fine; nobody was really identifying anything and I guess I was worried [that]

would translate to lower engagement," he said. "You want more people to come out and vote. We always say that the municipal level (of government) is really local: it's your water; it's your garbage; it's your snowplowing; it's your day-to-day activities and lives. I wish more people would have come out and voted but it's time to get back to work!"

By Brock Weir
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