

Ward System question gets lukewarm reception from candidates

By Brock Weir

The October 27 Municipal Election is getting close to the wire and with less than two weeks to go before election day, you might have already completed your scorecard on which mayor, council and trustee candidates have your voice.

But there is more on this month's ballot than just a who's who of people looking for your vote; you will be asked two important referendum questions, one of which has stirred up plenty of debate on the campaign trail so far: whether or not Aurora should adopt a ward system for Council.

On paper, the process is relatively simple. Aurora, as things stand now, is currently an 'at large' Council system where one mayor and eight councillors represent Aurora as a whole. If Aurora adopts a 'ward system', Aurora would be divided up into segments which could, in the end, be represented by one or two individual Councillors.

While some residents have been vocal in advocating for a change to the status quo, implementing a ward system is a concept that has received a relatively lukewarm reception on the campaign trail.

Mayoral contenders Geoff Dawe and John Gallo have both spoken against the concept at recent all-candidates meetings, with the incumbent, Mr. Dawe, weighing the pros and cons of the concept.

'I am ambivalent to falling on the 'no' side and the reason I am not overly in favour of it is I believe it promotes parochialism, it promotes one ward against another and, from my perspective, I do not want to see that,' said Mr. Dawe, noting that although it might make things simpler for the Mayor's Office in that specific residents' concerns might first be taken to a Councillor representing a specific ward, it doesn't align with how he views the office. 'From a global perspective, my concern is the mayor [represents] the entire town and for that reason I am not a big supporter of a ward system.'

A similar view was put forward by Mr. Gallo, who said while he was not in favour of a ward system, he would explore how to implement one if this month's ballot showed an 'overwhelming majority' of voters in favour.

'In an at-large system, you have many councillors, and up to nine including the mayor [with whom] you can address an issue,' said Mr. Gallo. 'In a ward system, you don't have that. And where would we get equal representation throughout the Town? Do we do it in quadrants? The four quadrants of Aurora are not equally represented in terms of residents. There are many, many issues I think should be explored once the ballot is over and we have a good sense of what Aurorans need.'

For the 28 candidates vying for eight seats on Council, the majority say they are not in favour of changing the status quo.

Jim Abram, for instance, said he is not in favour of a ward system overall but likes a hybrid model, such as one in Thunder Bay 'that provides a balance between ward and at-large councillors.'

For Barbara Barker, the geography of Aurora presents a particular challenge to a ward system.

'It divides the town up into too many quadrants and not evenly,' she said. 'I also feel that perhaps down the road if you get someone in that ward that doesn't perhaps like the ideas of someone who wants to put forth something then they will not do so. I believe that all Councillors should be made responsible for all of Aurora and not a part of it.'

A similar view was offered by Evelyn Buck.

'I still think of Aurora as nothing more than a single ward,' she said, noting pockets of high density development in Aurora versus larger estates and less people in the south end of Town. 'It would be difficult to divide Aurora into wards of an equal size. That is

not just a political aspect of a ward system, it is a physical reality of the Town. Our population is not much more than a city ward.?

James Hoyes also has concerns with a possible geographic split, noting that possible division lines are not clear and some neighbourhoods could be split, and voters could end up stuck with limited options.

?If you don't like or hear from your Councillor, who do you go to for help?? said Mr. Hoyes. ?Other wards could pass something directly affecting your neighbourhood and you have no way of truly helping your ward constituents.?

Candidate Carl Barrett, also said he believed voters had the right to shop around.

?As a resident, I would much rather have the opportunity to speak to eight councillors on an issue happening in my neighbourhood rather than one or two where maybe I am at the bottom of their list,? he said.

Added Ian Clark: ?[Wards take away] the ability of the Town to elect a spectrum of individuals to best represent the entire town. You can vote for people who are really strong business figures...but at the same time there are one or two candidates who really care about the environment. I would like to be able to balance my vote.?

Opposition from other candidates vying for your vote focused less on physical divisions of Aurora, but divisions that could crop up amongst both Councillors and neighbours once a ward system is implemented.

?I grew up in Stratford, which has a ward system, and it tends to create distinct lines within a city and almost divisional boundaries, the ?us and them' mentality is the fallout of such a system,? said Michael Ney. ?Aurora should, quite simply, be about ?us.?'?

Added Mark Etwell: ?I think it can lead to a not-in-my-backyard mentality and I wouldn't want that to happen. I want the best eight candidates looking after the best interests of the Town as a whole.?

Svetla Topouzova had similar sentiments.

?I believe a ward system in Aurora will only bring division and unhealthy competition between the wards after the election,? she said.

Council approved the ward referendum earlier this year after a motion from Paul Pirri. In order for a vote to be binding, a clear majority of eligible voters need to make their voices heard. Mr. Pirri, however, is another voice in opposition.

?As an individual who brought the two referendum questions forward, it may be a surprise for some to find out that I won't personally be voting for the implementation of a ward system,? he said. ?I believe Council has done a good job of listening to residents regardless of where in Town they live and I expect that to continue in the future as well.?