

Ward system reviewed as consultation begins

Public consultation has begun into whether or not Aurora should adopt a ward system of governance.

Just seven interested residents attended the first public meeting on the matter last Wednesday night at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Led by consultants Gary Davidson and Beate Bowron, the session – the second of which took place at Town Hall on Monday night – was an opportunity for residents to weigh in on whether Aurora should ditch its current at-large system of Council, whereby six Councillors are elected from across the Town to represent the entire community, in favour of a ward system with one Council member (at least) elected by one specific area of the municipality to represent their interests.

The public information session follows Council's decision made early in its mandate to bring a ward system to fruition – despite it being voted down in a public referendum in 2014.

“As towns grow, they tend to gravitate towards ward systems,” Mr. Davidson told the sparsely populated room. “Aurora is one of the largest towns in Ontario that still runs an at-large system. The only one that is larger [with an at-large system] is Sarnia.

“Aurora Council has asked its staff to look at the possibility of going from an at-large system to a ward system and specifically what the wards would look like. You can only make a decision once you've seen some options on wards. Council is going through this process to look at some options.”

The purpose of the Electoral System Review (ESR) is to investigate which communities within Aurora should be kept within the same wards, whether there are any natural or built features – such as the Oak Ridges Moraine, train tracks, or major traffic arteries – that would be obvious ward boundaries, and how population should be distributed according to ward boundaries.

“The ESR is not about whether the current system of electing Councillors should stay as it is or not,” he continued. “At the end of the process, Council will make a decision on whether they like one of the ward systems and want to move on that. The process is to look at what wards would look like so an informed decision can be made.”

First and foremost to keep in mind, he told residents, was achieving effective representation and “voter parity” where everybody's vote carries a similar weight. Voters in a ward with a population of 500, he illustrated, would be weighted twice as much as a voter in a ward of 1,000 residents, and this is best avoided.

?In an at-large system, voter parity is never an issue because everybody is voting for the Mayor and all the Councillors,? he said. ?In a ward system, because you're going to try and design wards which are geographical entities within the Town, you have to try and balance it off; they don't have to be exact, but you try to get it within 10 to 15 per cent of each other so my vote has a similar weight as anybody else's vote.?

In bringing their ideas to the table, residents were first asked to consider areas of interest, including long-established communities with specific identities and interests, perhaps even those advocated for by already established ratepayer organizations, consider a Councillor's capacity to represent an area, and how geographic challenges, such as Aurora's north-heavy population versus the sparsely populated Oak Ridges Moraine settlements in the south, can be addressed.

Another factor to consider, the consultants, said, was future growth projections.

?If you decide to go to wards, you want them to last for not just the next election, but elections into the future,? said Mr. Davidson, noting the target year to launch a ward system, should Council decide to adopt a particular model, is 2026. ?We try to design them [to last] three, possibly four elections. If a ward system works in 2026, it will probably work in 2030 and possibly in 2034.?

Discussions were led by Ms. Bowron and followed a similar set of questions outlined in an online survey conducted by the Town, which has collected more than 150 responses so far. Ms. Bowron said that following the two public information sessions, feedback received would be compiled and condensed into a report due before Council in November. From there, further public sessions will be rolled out by December with the final report, including ward options, ready ?in about February? for Council's consideration in June.

From the perspective of resident Jim Jackson, some questions were left off the list that should be considered, including socio-economic areas of Aurora, areas that are defined by demographics, ?old versus new,? etc.

?You really have to start to list priorities with what's important,? said Mr. Jackson, adding he would like to see ?at least six? wards adopted, one for every ?10,000 people into the future, so you don't need to reinvent the wheel every election.?

Daniel Koffman expressed a similar view, questioning how the needs of sparsely populated areas of Aurora, such as in the southeast, would be addressed through a ward system.

?One of the issues with Aurora is how it is laid out,? said Mr. Koffman. ?You have a huge chunk of Moraine lumped in with another ward

and then you don't have representation for those few people on the Moraine if they're lumped in with more of an established residential community. It's completely different needs and that can become an issue.?

Speaking in support of a ward system was Anna Kroeplin, who attended the meeting on behalf of her Ratepayers Association.

?At least residents will know who is in charge [in a ward system] and who they need to speak to first,? she said. ?If I don't get the answer I want from one Councillor, [I can go to] another Councillor and it just keeps filtering down. It's very frustrating for the residents and the ratepayers to not get the answers we need. I think the ward [system] will bring that communication.?

By Brock Weir