

# Aurora residents will still have chance to sound off in Open Forum as election approaches

**By Brock Weir**

Aurora residents will have more chances to voice their concerns to Council almost right up until the election, if new recommendations are approved by Council this week.

Councillors are set to give the green light to a series of new measures which govern what Councillors, along with mayoral and council candidates can do in the lead-up to October 27's election. The original recommendations were debated by Council in early March, but were pushed over into April for further consideration.

Among the recommendations causing the most concern among elected officials were recommendations to terminate the broadcasting of Council and Committee meetings from June 30 until after the election was wrapped up, as well as stopping residents from coming forward to speak during the traditional Open Forum effective the same day.

Open Forum is the traditional venue for residents to come forward to voice their concerns on just about anything that is on their mind which concerns the Town. Town Solicitor Warren Mar recommended to Council that Open Forum be suspended by the end of June to avoid the 'awkward situation' of having to turn off the microphone of speakers should what they have to say, for instance, turn into partisan election attacks or critiques of members of Council.

When the matter was debated last month, Councillors were divided on the value of keeping Open Forum in place during the election period. But, at last week's General Committee, those in support of keeping the status quo won the day. If these recommendations are approved this week, Open Forum will remain on the books until the last Council meeting before the polls open.

'I believe the public need to know they can come to the Council chamber at any time and express their views in Open Forum,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner last week in support of maintaining Open Forum. 'I don't think it is part of the democratic process to discontinue that. I understand what the concerns are [but] I think it is contrary to what we are trying to do with the public.'

Also speaking in favour of keeping Open Forum were Councillors Evelyn Buck and Chris Ballard. For Councillor Buck, a more practical solution was to cut off Open Forum at the first Council meeting after all nominations have to be in. Although that would be a compromise, she said she was in favour of the dialogue Open Forum allows.

'Nobody has been more abused by people appearing in Open Forum than I have and I don't think anyone can argue with that,' she said. 'Public forum was introduced for the first time in Aurora when I was Mayor. It wasn't my idea, but I am proud of it. I would insist that any attempt to restrict the public's right to participate is going to make us look like a bunch of scaredy-cats, terrified of what might happen to you in the next election.'

In his support, Councillor Ballard called Open Forum 'a wonderful exercise in democracy' and something he often thought was the 'highlight' of Council meetings. He was not concerned, he said, with people coming forward and 'abusing' it as he hadn't seen that happen since it started, and the Mayor has a button to cut off their microphone if discussions go sideways.

'Frankly, if a would-be candidate comes before us and makes outrageous or outlandish statements, I think the public is smart enough to understand what is going on and I think it would reflect exceptionally poorly on the candidate or would-be candidate who is speaking and would probably be detrimental to them winning,' he said.

With having the button at the ready to turn off microphones, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe replied that even though he has the 'magic button', when he does use it, as he did last month when a resident made allegations against a member of the public, he was 'accused of impugning democracy.'

?As long as Council is okay with me actually cutting people off who were inappropriate during Open Forum, then we can move on,? said Mayor Dawe. ?From June 30 to election day there are perhaps five meetings that would be removing Open Forum. To suggest that we are somehow impeding democracy is perhaps a touch of hyperbole. Anyone who wishes to come to Council has the opportunity to make a delegation.?

Making delegations was a compromise over Open Forum, argued Councillor Paul Pirri, who said delegation rules could be relaxed to keep things more orderly.

?If there is an attack against a certain member of Council, it might make sense that they would at least be able to respond in some capacity,? said Councillor Pirri. ?I think that is a fair balance.?