

Councillors push back on plans to eliminate Committee meeting

Aurora Councillors are pushing back on the forthcoming elimination of one of Town Hall's bi-weekly General Committee meetings.

At last week's potentially penultimate General Committee meeting, Councillors spoke out about the recent decision taken by Mayor Tom Mrakas to change the structure of their meeting schedule.

As things currently stand, Council meets four times per month with the first and third Tuesday of each month allocated for a General Committee (GC) meeting where issues are intended to be discussed by lawmakers in-depth, a Public Planning meeting set for the second Tuesday of the month, and a Council meeting to ratify the decisions made at GC on the fourth Tuesday.

Earlier this month, Mayor Mrakas announced a shake-up, eliminating the two GC meetings in favour of one new meeting, called a Committee of the Whole, to discuss matters ahead of the monthly Council meeting.

This move, he said, would give more flexibility in making the leftover Tuesday open for Special Council meetings and planning matters, among others, but Council members argue the matter should have come before them for consideration and discussion.

The concerns were brought forward through a motion from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland which called on Council to request Mayor Mrakas to reconsider using Strong Mayor powers to alter the current structure of Council and/or Committee meetings so Councillors can carry out work as they were originally elected to do.

"This is really just about the principles of respect and democratic decision-making around such changes in a formal motion and in public," she said. "I realize there was an email sent around by the Head of Council; however, this was something I feel a few of us around the table felt it was preferred to have an open debate about and Council felt that email was an inappropriate method in doing so. We didn't feel there was a collaboration and discussion; it was more matter-of-fact."

One of the reasons Mayor Mrakas cited in eliminating the GC meetings was the positive work staff had been doing on managing the weight of the meeting agendas. While Councillor Gilliland said she agreed with this sentiment, there was no discussion on the pros and cons of the need [and] I am more than willing to have a healthy discussion about this."

"Until that time, I am asking that the decision be repealed and we can have a decision made collaboratively as a Council together," she said.

This view was supported by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese who said not enough "good information" had come forward from the Mayor "to identify what the risks are or the benefits are of moving in that direction."

"I have taken a look at other Committees of the Whole [in other municipalities] and I am just not convinced this is the right direction to go, but I could be convinced if I had more information, probably," he said. "At the moment, I am just in favour of (Councillor Gilliland's) motion if it gives a sober second thought to what the purpose of this is and we get the information that we likely would have gotten if we had a good debate on the topic."

Also voicing his support for a further discussion was Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo who said he didn't see any "significant issues" with the current structure.

"I didn't see a need for change. It's not as if we've had many issues," he said. "I don't even know what triggered this type of thing, but what bothered me the most is the fact that it was done without any open discussion at the Council table. To me, that is not cool. At the end of the day, we could move in that direction but we should be doing it at this table."

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner was on a similar wavelength, adding that one Council meeting was eliminated from the monthly

rota in the 2018-2022 term of Council.

'I would also like this to be a public discussion with the pros and cons of changing the current structure,' she said. 'It seems to be working and we've already taken away one Council meeting in the last term, so I would like it to be a public discussion.'

While Mayor Mrakas didn't speak to the motion at the Council table, support for his move came from Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim.

'We can be traditionalists or we could be creative and flexible and try something different,' he said. 'I believe if anything what this decision from the Mayor simplifies is our Council has the ability to be flexible. How many times have we stated in Council over the years that we should not be followers but leaders? How many times have we asked staff what other municipalities are doing this and then wanting to follow? If no one else is doing it, why are we doing this? It is kind of a bipolar attitude and I think the right perspective here is and I think always to be flexible and creative and find something different.'

'I think over the last couple of months going into last year, we had many Closed Session items and I've heard on many occasions, 'I wish we had more time to discuss this.' time slot where we can have plenty more time to have good, collective, rational thought on some of these Closed Session items instead of being rushed before Council or going back in at 10.30 or 11 p.m. This gives us that extra time slot that we could comfortably think out and process these things through and part of the flexibility of this is if it is not working after a year there is nothing to state we can't [go] back.'

By Brock Weir
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