

## Pay raise for Council nixed again as Strong Mayor powers raise questions

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland says she is seeking "external" legal advice on Strong Mayor powers after a raise in Councillor salaries was once again nixed by lawmakers.

At issue was a motion brought forward by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo at last week's Council meeting which could have seen the controversial pay raise Council voted itself last fall, one which was subsequently cancelled by Mayor Tom Mrakas through his Strong Mayor powers, reinstated.

In the motion, Councillor Gallo said the salary increase was to be funded by the Town's Tax Rate Stabilization Fund with "no tax levy increase on the taxpayer" and should go forward under the same funding model.

Speaking to his motion, he called for a "public explanation to both [Council] and the public" so "everyone better understands exactly what transpired."

In last fall's heated debate, Mayor Mrakas stated that the raise would not go forward and he would not be introducing it in the 2024 Budget, a new privilege given to the head of Council from the Province in October through "Strong Mayor" powers.

"One of those points raised in those meetings [between Mayor and staff in the lead-up to the budget] were explicit instructions from the Mayor that it was his choice not to have the Council compensation included in the 2024 budget and he asked that it be removed [when it would] have] otherwise been included from the motion," said Aurora CEO Doug Nadorozny, referencing the motion coming out of Council last fall approving the pay raise on a vote of 4 ? 3.

This position was supported by Mayor Mrakas later in last week's debate.

"During both times we discussed this at GC and at Council, I said this is not going to be in the budget. I said it publicly, I released a statement saying so, and, as has been mentioned by our staff and by our legal team, as far as "Strong Mayor powers in the legislation does not require mayoral direction to specifically do this; it requires the Mayor to develop a budget with staff and I have the instructions as far as what is to be included and what is to be excluded per the legislation. Hence why we're here.

"I heard overwhelmingly from the public " thousands of emails, and if you'd like I will show them to you, and I am sure you guys got a lot of them as well " that they wanted me to specifically use the powers that the legislation afforded me, that the Provincial Government provided to municipalities across this Province, to remove this from the budget moving forward. I acted upon [what] our residents and our community overwhelmingly wanted."

Nevertheless, in speaking to his motion, Councillor Gallo said a "flaw" in Strong Mayors powers was communication and a decision like that should have been formally presented as the raise was passed by Council resolution.

"That is kind of why I am bringing it back. I believe the majority of Council should rule the day," said Councillor Gallo who, along with Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner and Councillor Gilliland, was among the 4 ? 3 Council majority that supported the original salary increase motion.

But the February 27 motion raised more questions than answers, particularly for Councillors Gilliland and Weese who both questioned the purpose of the motion and what it would ultimately result in.

"I didn't see a mayoral decision written, even though it was declared it was going to happen. I voted for (Council Compensation). Everyone should know I am in opposition of the Strong Mayor powers and the use of them for non-Provincial priorities," said Councillor Weese, who asked staff for clarification on whether they believed a formal motion from the Mayor was necessary.

Town Solicitor Patricia De Sario replied that the legislation related to Strong Mayor gives the Head of Council the power to propose and adopt a budget.

Councillor Gilliland agreed there is a lot of grey area around Strong Mayor powers but noted she felt the motion on the table was opening a can of worms. She suggested the Strong Mayor Powers have fostered a relationship on Council that is not collaborative between elected members.

I do blame this [Provincial] Government for the Strong Mayor powers for these small municipalities because, in my opinion, they just don't work, she said, adding the issue of Council Compensation has nothing to do with Ontario's housing priorities. To me, working as a team with my Councilmates for the betterment of the community is exactly what I want to do. I wish we did have a collaborative working relationship but, unfortunately, we have been put in this putting politics in front of people mentality and making fellow Councillors feel, I guess, less valued for the sake of gaining votes or maybe pushing negative votes out there.

She went on to say information put out to the public by the Mayor relating to Council compensation was misleading and doing so unethical.

Noting she did not recognize the motion, Councillor Gilliland left the Council table as the debate continued.

Councillor Gaertner said when she most recently ran for Council she knew what members' pay was, but found out later through an independent committee review that Aurora Council was so underpaid compared to the 18 municipalities studied.

I consider that disrespectful to the work we do and to the responsibility we hold, she said. I just cannot understand why the Mayor wouldn't want us to get a fair salary.

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson held the opposing view, stating it's all about the other Councillors feeling they themselves are underpaid.

I have heard people question the value of certain items or incentives, making reference to the residents pinching pennies, making reference to residents' struggles and whenever Council compensation comes up none of those comments come forward, he said. It is all about them feeling that they themselves are unfairly paid. I am sure there are lots of residents in this community who feel they are unfairly paid as well. I am sure there are lots of residents that are struggling and don't necessarily agree with this, either. The vote happened, but thank goodness the Mayor had Strong Mayor powers because I think it reflects the vast majority of residents in this community who don't agree we should get this sizable increase and I agree with them.

Councillor Gallo's motion failed on a tie vote of 3 to 3 as Councillor Gilliland's abstention and absence from the table counted as a no vote, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim was absent from the meeting altogether.

That wasn't the end of the matter, however.

During the New Business session of the meeting, Councillor Gallo brought the motion forward once again for reconsideration to give Councillor Gilliland the chance to underscore her views given her absence.

It was not appropriate for the way the Strong Mayor powers was utilized, she stated. I think it was a lot of learning that was done about what Strong Mayor powers can do and how the process was doing a simple social media post or just making an announcement in my opinion is not considered a formal declaration of mayoral decision on what is to be done, she said. It is very informal and I think there is a lot of broken process in this.

I am really disappointed we're having to have these conversations all over again on whether or not we should have an increase or not. This is not about the increase but the procedure. I look at this as an inappropriate motion on the floor. This is something that should be done behind the scenes, through staff, figuring out what that proper process was. What this motion is doing is just

identifying that there was a process that was broken. There have been other procedures we've broken, we don't come back with amendments and motions for that.

?This is politically engaging and it is a way to get out there and ensure we can cause a ruckus with the public all over again. It's an easy one. I don't want to engage in this. That is why I left. I do not want to be part of something I don't believe should be on the floor?. I am not satisfied with our legal counsel and the answer we were given ? I am sorry, I am just not happy with that.?

Adding there was a time gap between Council's approval of a pay raise last fall and it not making the 2024 Budget, she added: ?The fact we got an increase for two months and it was taken away, in what world do you get a pay increase and then someone takes it away? To me that dabbles in constructive dismissal?. To suggest that, ?Oh, the public. I did it for the public.' I received more emails and more public outcry over the \$60 million [Town Square] project, but that? That? That is different from the \$60,000 we're going about now??

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