

Town calls on Ontario to introduce recall elections

By Brock Weir

A motion calling on the Province to put the wheels in motion on legislation giving voters the opportunity to turf their public officials if they lose the confidence of the people that put them in office was passed by Aurora Councillors last week.

The motion, originally introduced in January by Councillor Paul Pirri, calls on the province to consider implementing legislation to recall municipally-elected officials, arguing this would be a more effective way of dealing with Council members who have fallen short in their conduct.

“Significant damage can be caused in a four year period should an elected official act to the detriment of the municipality,” said Councillor Pirri in his notice of motion. “It is not the most effective use of time for municipal representatives to police one another through Codes of Conduct and Integrity Commissioners and penalties that can be imposed through Codes of Conduct are relatively minor. There is a problem with Codes of Conduct and Integrity Commissioners being used for political purposes and Codes of Conduct have proven ineffective in curtailing detrimental behaviour.”

In other jurisdictions where recall elections could take place, a sitting elected official could get called up for re-election should they be seen as having lost the confidence of the voters if a very high threshold of the electorate – often between 45 per cent and 50 per cent of eligible voters – came together to sign a petition to turf the elected official. They would then have to face the voters once again to see if this public confidence would be restored.

The Councillor's motion was approved at Council 5 – 4 with Councillors Evelyn Buck, Chris Ballard, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo voting against.

While Councillor Buck said she was not in favour of any legislation that would remain beholden to a four year term of office, arguing that three years was sufficient for any Council term, the others said they still had hopes that Codes of Conduct and Integrity Commissioners could be used effectively at the table.

“I think the last Council with the Code of Conduct was trying to do something like this without making it so extreme,” said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. “I don't feel very comfortable about the motion.”

Councillor Ballard, on the other hand, said the motion had good “intent” in holding Councillors accountable for their behaviour but cited examples in British Columbia where he says he has come to see constant recall elections as a “detriment to good government.”

“I know this motion is more focused on the behaviour rather than keeping political promises, but I fear this could be misused if there were a number of dedicated opponents to certain elected officials who could use this type of legislation to wreak havoc,” he said. “From that perspective, I am nervous about how we handle the behaviour of Councillors.”

“I would rather have the government sort out its Code of Conduct and Integrity Commissioner legislation first before it looks at this type of legislation. I think that if that was improved, it would probably deal with the issues Councillor Pirri is concerned about, and that we're all concerned about.”

Nevertheless, the idea won the support of Council and with the majority vote, word of their support for this legislation will be sent to Premier Kathleen Wynne, as well as other municipalities in Ontario to garner their support as well.

“I think if you have that many people coming out to say we don't have the support of the general electorate, who am I to argue with the public at large?” said Councillor Pirri. “I do think from a democratic standpoint it is definitely beneficial giving citizens the right of ensuring the individuals representing them are representing them.”

?There would have to be mechanisms in place to ensure that the individuals signing the petition are who they say they are, but I think at the core, at this basic level, all we are doing is requesting that the province look into this and study it.?