

Council passes permanent electronic participation bylaw

By Mike Baker

Virtual attendance during Orangeville council and committee meetings may become more of a permanent fixture for elected officials moving forward after the municipality signed off on a new bylaw this week permitting electronic participation at official Town gatherings.

Brought to Council by Town Clerk Karen Landry, the new bylaw draws on recent changes made by the provincial government to the Municipal Act. Back in March, with COVID-19 bringing all in-person meetings to a screeching halt, the Ontario government enacted new temporary emergency provisions that allowed municipal councils to meet virtually, to ensure they could keep on top of things during the pandemic.

That emergency declaration, allowing for virtual meetings, expired on July 24. Prior to the expiration, the Province introduced the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act. One of the key pieces of this new legislation, Ms. Landry explained, is a provision that authorizes the continued use of electronic participation for municipal meetings. The Act also permits municipalities to exercise new powers with respect to proxy voting for members of Council.

“These provisions allow municipalities the option to retain the flexibility they have been afforded throughout the declared emergency and enable them to adapt to future changing circumstances,” Ms. Landry stated in her report.

Ms. Landry emphasized that in-person attendance by members of Council and committees is important, so as to “enhance accountability and transparency in the decision-making process”.

With that in mind, she suggested that, once the world has returned to a sense of normalcy, that a physical quorum be maintained at all Orangeville council meetings, essentially meaning that a maximum of three members could participate electronically. Both the Town clerk and mayor, or deputy mayor if the mayor is unable to attend, should be physically present in Council chambers for all meetings, while members wishing to participate electronically must give 72 hours notice prior to the scheduled meeting.

The new rules also changes things for members of the public. Delegates and presenters, while encouraged to physically attend the meetings they wish to speak at, will now be able to participate electronically, at the discretion of the Town clerk. Individuals will also be able to participate virtually, or over the phone, during question period.

The majority of Council seemed supportive of the new electronic participation guidelines, although there was less enthusiasm over the potential for proxy voting, which would essentially allow Council members to designate other members to vote in their stead should they not be able to attend a particular meeting.

“I don't like any of this,” said Deputy Mayor Andy Macintosh. “I understand why (it's being proposed), because of the situation we're in, but I can just see how people could abuse this.”

He added, “I go back to the police decision. That night was horrible. (If these rules were in place), I could have just given Coun. Sherwood my proxy and not shown up. I can just see the (potential) for abuse. People will constantly use it, and not be in council chambers.”

“We all know, it's a whole different feeling when you're inside chambers facing the public. By doing this, we're not facing the public. We're not being accountable. It could be abused, and that's all I'm worried about,” Deputy Mayor Macintosh concluded.

Coun. Todd Taylor spoke of the benefits of electronic participation, saying elected officials would have more of an opportunity to join meetings if they're out of town should the municipality permanently approve the practice. Coun. Joe Andrews noted this would

also be a benefit for committee meetings.

In the end, Council voted 6 to 1 to approve electronic participation, with Deputy Mayor Macintosh opposed, but declined to take up the option to pass proxy voting.