

Council votes to keep prayer at its meetings

By Bill Rea

Changes are coming to the procedural bylaw governing the way Caledon council meets, but some things are staying the same. For example, councillors voted down a staff recommendation to do away with a prayer at the start of meetings. Staff had suggested a Moment of Reflection, but councillors voted to maintain a prayer, although none was specified.

As well, council will be adopting a committee system in the New Year. Councillor Nick deBoer was named to chair the Planning and Development Committee for the remainder of the current term of council, with Councillor Doug Beffort being named vice-chair. Councillor Jennifer Innis will chair the General Committee, with Councillor Rob Mezzapelli as vice-chair.

Staff recommended doing away with the public question period, which currently is one of the last items on council agendas. There are often no members of the public left in the Council Chambers when they reach that point of the agenda.

Staff reported that since 2012, there have been 117 times when members of the public addressed council at Question Period, but only 27 of those occasions actually involved a question being asked. Staff stated a more effective way to engage public participation is to encourage people to seek permission to delegate at committee and council meetings.

The vote to retain Question Period was defeated on a tie, with Councillors Barb Shaughnessy, Gord McClure, Beffort and Annette Groves voting to retain it. Innis was absent from the meeting.

In addition, staff recommended restricting the number of presentations from staff to three per meeting, and holding them to 10 minutes each, with councillors being able to ask questions of the presenters after. The proposal also called for holding delegations to five minutes, but council voted to increase that to 10.

Director of Administration and Town Clerk Carrie deGorter said the changes voted by council will be incorporated in the revised bylaw, which will be brought back to the Dec. 22 meeting of council.

Shaughnessy didn't like the idea of restricting delegates to five minutes. She pointed out people approaching open session of council are often nervous, and can either speak slowly, or are concerned about running out of time and talk very quickly. She thought a 10-minute time limit would be better.

Mezzapelli didn't think the time restriction was a big deal. He couldn't remember an occasion when a person making a delegation was cut off.

DeGorter told deBoer people who approach staff just before the meeting, seeking permission to delegate, will be able to be accommodated. She added that happened at the last council meeting.

There were some concerns about getting rid of Question Period.

Groves thought it appropriate that the public have an opportunity to ask questions of council.

"We're a public service," she said.

Shaughnessy commented it does allow people to raise issues, with staff putting positions on the public record. She added it lets her get a feel for what people in other wards are concerned about.

In terms of a prayer, Peel Regional councillors earlier this year opted to scrap the one that had been recited at the start of meetings for more than 30 years. This was in response to a Supreme Court of Canada ruling that the municipal council in Saguenay, Quebec, could not open its council meetings with a prayer.

Groves commented the Caledon representatives at Region all opposed the move, and she argued the community would be disappointed if the prayer were taken out of meetings here.

Shaughnessy observed the Supreme Court ruling referred to the Lord's Prayer. Regional council used to recite a generic prayer.

Caledon council has several prayers, including one patterned on the former Regional Prayer, which Shaughnessy thought was nice.

"I think we can be more inclusive," she said. "I think it should reflect the people who are here."

DeGorter told Beffort the Supreme Court ruling did refer to the Lord's Prayer, but she added the idea behind stopping it was to get rid of the religious overtones. The Moment of Reflection that was suggested in the staff report would be more appropriate. She added councils in some municipalities use the time to re-affirm their oaths.

She also pointed out council meetings are essentially business meetings. She wondered at what other business meetings to participants pray.

Mayor Allan Thompson countered prayer is important to some people. He recalled he and Groves met with representatives of the Punjabi community shortly after the Region decided to get rid of its prayer, and the Caledon reps were praised for the stand they took.

Mezzapelli suggested a "commitment of conduct" as a possible alternative to the prayer.

'I'm spiritual, but I'm religious too,' McClure commented, arguing in favour of keeping a prayer. 'Caledon should be different.'
But Councillor Johanna Downey was of a different mind.

'Government is for people,' she said, adding she's involved in her church. 'I don't bring it into this room.'

Staff had also suggested getting rid of the Council Inquiries portion of the agenda. They argued it often leads to debate of matters not on the agenda.

Groves wanted that section maintained, pointing out the items that are raised are often ones that constituents have asked be brought up.

Thompson observed it would be better if staff were informed ahead of time that an issue would be raised so they could prepare.

Beffort said staff are sometimes embarrassed at being caught off-guard by questions. He said he can always get the information from staff that he needs by talking to them.

'They're good at that,' he said

The vote to maintain Council Inquiries passed, with Shaughnessy, McClure, Thompson, deBoer and Groves in support.