

Town will not use ranked ballots in 2018 elections

By Bill Rea

Ranked ballots in elections makes sense to a lot of people, but there's not much appetite for having them in Caledon for the next municipal election.

Town councillors recently supported the staff recommendation to stick with the current system, also known as 'first past the post'. The use of ranked ballots (sometimes also known as preferential ballots or weighted ballots) would involve voters picking their preferred candidate, as well as naming their second and third choice. The number of first choice ballots would be counted, with the candidate coming in last being eliminated. The second choices on the ballots for the eliminated candidate would be distributed with the last place person being dropped. The process would continue until one candidate has a clear majority.

The staff report to councillors noted changes to the Municipal Elections Act give municipalities the option of using ranked ballots for the next election, scheduled for the fall of 2018.

The report also stated there are many arguments for and against the use of ranked ballots. The system is used for local governments in Scotland, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, as well as some municipalities in the United States. But it is not currently used anywhere in Canada.

'Ranked ballot voting is believed to capture elector preference,' the staff report stated. 'Other noted advantages include improved platforms and debates, voters have more choice and there aren't any wasted votes.'

But the report also pointed to administrative and financial concerns involving the counting of the votes.

Staff pointed out that voters in Caledon currently vote for their mayor, as well as area and Regional councillors. If this system were put in place, it could require each voter having to fill out multiple ballots.

'This could lead to great confusion for the elector and potentially an increase in the number of spoiled ballots as a result,' the report stated.

The staff report went on to say the legislation allowing the use of ranked ballots is new.

'There isn't an adequate level of technical support or resources available to provide a sufficient comfort level with introducing the change to the voting system,' it stated. 'At this time, staff are not comfortable implementing a complete change to the voting process in the Town that simply hasn't been rolled out or used in Ontario of Canada.'

Mayor Allan Thompson agreed the system is not advanced enough to be of benefit to taxpayers.

'I don't think we're there yet,' he said.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli agreed it could be 'confusing.'

'I actually believe this is a better reflection of the will of the people,' he remarked, but agreed it might be hard to implement for the 2018 elections.

He also spoke about public education effort, commenting that it should be the public who decides to switch to ranked ballots. He wondered if the town could start a public education program explaining the pros and cons of ranked ballots, as well as first past the post, and possibly have a question on the 2018 ballots.

Clerk Carey deGorter told him staff does its best when it comes to educating the public. She also said staff will be bringing forth a report some time next year about the possibility of putting a question on the ballot.

DeGorter said there are rules governing such questions. They have to pertain to the municipality and have to be answered either with a yes or no.

As well, for the results of such a question to mean anything, at least 50 per cent of eligible voters would have to actually vote. She said the traditional voter turnout in Caledon is between 30 and 40 per cent. DeGorter added the results of such a question would provide useful information, but she warned against basing a decision on them.

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy said she could see Mezzapelli's point, adding she would love to see voter turnout improved. She stressed the need to encourage people to vote, but she said they would also have to be encouraged to take part in any education process. She said there are people who have a hard time understanding the system as it stands.

Councillor Jennifer Innis observed that making things more complicated it going to deter people from voting.