

Township meetings to remain virtual

By Mark PavilonsEditor

All Township meetings will remain virtual, until at least this coming spring. Councillors voted on staff recommendations recently, to maintain the virtual meeting format through the end of the current term. Depending on provincial guidelines in the spring, council may opt to change the format. A few councillors longed for the return of in-person council meetings and engaging the public first-hand. Some thought that a hybrid model, combining in-person attendance and virtual streaming, may be an option. Staff will look at the options and keep an eye on the Province's plan to lift workplace health and safety measures by next March 22. Staff noted that during the pandemic, the virtual meetings have provided for greater health and safety measures for all involved – council, staff and the public. Staff pointed out the vast majority of municipalities have conducted fully electronic meetings since the onset of the pandemic. Even though the meetings were presented this way out of necessity, council was able to conduct its meetings effectively, and the advantages of allowing electronic participation during council meetings became evident. Staff also said council continued its regular schedule and actually saw higher public attendance. Councillor David Boyd said it would be nice to come into the building again and interact with staff. He said it's "healthy" to have a hybrid model. Councillor Bill Cober said the virtual format works, but he said perhaps they could find a way to accommodate those who wish to make in-person deputations. It wouldn't necessarily involve a major installation of equipment. Councillor Debbie Schaefer said the Township has made progress in the virtual arena and she'd like to see the live-streamed meetings kept in an archive for a longer term. She is also anxious to get to a stage where the public can attend council meetings once again. Kathryn Moyle, Director of Corporate Services, said municipalities are obligated to follow provincial public health protocols for indoor limits and in with respect to its employees. King has a duty to both the public and its staff. The Province recently eased off on its reopening plan in light of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 so it's very much a wait and see situation. The public has warmed up to the virtual approach and staff did point out that the hybrid approach would come with some noticeable costs to upgrade equipment. Staff are looking to other municipalities to see how they're handling things. Councillor Avia Eek said the current method has been quite efficient and engagement has been high. Mayor Steve Pellegrini said staff recommendations to remain virtual is the best option, unless "we're prepared to spend a lot of money." "We have to keep the community safe," he stressed. From the very start of the pandemic, King has been extremely cautious and prudent. Schaefer added despite the virtual attendance numbers, she's not convinced public engagement is better. "Something is lost by not being seen by your council members," she said. King staff will provide short and long-term meeting considerations and options, aligned with the provincial timetable for lifting remaining public health and workplace safety measures. In his written submission, King resident J. Bruce Craig said he agreed there have been a number of benefits realized in moving to virtual meetings, such as accessibility to meetings for a wide range of people from different locations. The saving of travel time and reduction in GHG emissions has also been very positive. He did point out that at times council members have been hard to hear or there have been occasional challenges with powerpoint presentations. Craig said many recognize the value of in-person meetings when discussing matters of importance, and my hope is that at an appropriate time the Township will move to "in-person" meetings while maintaining the livestream service. This would then continue to support the goal of accessibility for the wider public, even for those who may be in an office or travelling. He recommended that all members of council be "consistently visible and present" for virtual meetings which they attend. It is important for the public to see elected representatives during a meeting and to see how council members respond and vote. "Similar to in-person council meetings I believe it is best practice for all members of council to be consistently visible during the formal part of a virtual council meeting or Committee of the Whole meeting. Craig pointed out that York Region council meetings and those of many local municipalities are recorded and available for viewing after the meeting. He recommends that King Township also implement this service.