

Council sticks with evening meetings

By Mark PavilonsEditor

There will be no change to council meetings this year. Staff introduced ways to streamline the council process, and while some changes were adopted, others were summarily dismissed. Staff recommended moving council meetings to Tuesday afternoons, from its current Monday evening schedule. But councillors were quick to shoot down the idea, noting it would limit, not encourage public participation. Staff noted that holding daytime meetings may actually increase participation. The meetings, they contend, would be more productive, as everyone would be more alert and focused. This format would have resulted in an estimated \$50,000 cost savings to the Township, eliminating paying staff overtime. Echoing his colleagues' sentiments, Mayor Steve Pellegrini pointed out he was on council in 2001 when it switched to the evening sessions. He said there's no rush to change and he'd like to see a survey to determine what the public wants. The Monday evening meetings will remain until the end of 2023, when the matter may be revisited. Council did support melding the council and Committee of the Whole Meetings, and maintaining the hybrid virtual and in-person format. The pandemic led to virtual council meetings and this method has continued. Staff want to continue as both virtual and in-person meetings, with the addition of new technology and updated systems. Enhancements have been made to the audio and visual equipment to ensure a seamless meeting experience no matter where an individual is participating or viewing from. Staff pointed out the hybrid meeting format is intended to accommodate both in-person and remote meeting participants and the first one will be a public planning meeting April 3. Currently, council operates under a "Committee of the Whole" model, which provides a forum for debate and informal discussion and debate. Staff believe by eliminating this model, they can streamline the legislative process and improve meetings. Many other municipalities operate with a council only model and this will cut down on producing Committee of the Whole agendas. There are procedural benefits and efficiencies and staff believe this model will make meetings more accessible and transparent to the public and reduce confusion. It will also administratively improve efficiencies in agenda preparation. Resident Bruce Craig pointed out the hybrid format is helpful and provides flexibility and the merging of Committee makes it easier for the public. Public participation would be hindered if council opted for the afternoon meetings, he said, urging council to keep the current structure. Councillors pointed out that parents with children, and those who work, wouldn't be able to attend the afternoon meetings. Councillors themselves, have full-time jobs and switching the meetings would cause some challenges. Several mentioned they want to encourage public input, not discourage it. Councillor Debbie Schaefer said some of the changes are positive but she, too, asked for more time to mull the idea over. Councillor David Boyd said he sympathized with shift workers and noted everyone's afraid of change. He recommended not abandoning the idea of daytime meetings entirely and revisiting it in the future.