

## **A question of questioning**

### **Council should invite public inquiries**

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When it comes to listening to the concerns of residents, councillors should be all ears.

A new procedural bylaw for council to follow during meetings is coming down the pike before the end of June. One of the points of the new bylaw will be whether there will be a formal question period on the agenda for members of the public to make inquiries to council.

In fairness, council does currently allow some questions from the public after meetings, but the question period often seems hurried and no one can ask a question that has not been covered by the day's meeting or else they are cut off abruptly.

There are three or four 'regulars', for lack of a better word, who attend Town Hall meetings almost without fail. These same individuals will listen intently to the details of each meeting, and ask questions to councillors during the question period. At times, councillors have become visibly annoyed with the questions from the 'regulars', snapping back with short answers or telling them to put their questions in writing. And when these people oblige council by putting their questions in writing, they often have to wait a long period of time for a response or don't receive a response at all, some of the regulars have told the Times-Journal.

A champion for free speech in Uxbridge council chambers recently has been Tara McCullough, who has addressed council more than once about the importance of keeping question period on the agenda. She pointed to Bill 130, an amendment to the Municipal Act, which speaks to transparency from government. Ms. McCullough suggests the act should encourage council to invite questions, not the opposite.

And while councillors may view these particular residents as a thorn in their side, they should look at the matter differently. These people are taking the time out of their day to attend the meetings, and have genuine concern about what does and does not happen in their township. If a resident asks a critical question, councillors should be able to answer it. Or, if the answer is not known, the resident should be told politely that council or staff will look into the matter and get back to them.

The new procedural bylaw gives the opportunity for some other useful rules to be put in place. For example, the bylaw should specify a window of time for council to provide responses to residents if an answer is not immediately available or the resident has been told to put a question in writing.

After all, the same councillors have expressed frustration in the past when public meetings are poorly attended or when residents show apathy towards a matter that affects Uxbridge. Municipal officials should be happy they govern a township that is home to some passionate residents.

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