

Council to tweak procedural by-law

Clarington staff has suggested some tweaking of the Municipality's Procedural Bylaw, in a report issued on Monday. Clarington's Procedural By-law governs the calling, the place and proceedings of meetings.

Last month, in advance of the staff report, council voted to reinstate the 10-minute rule for members of the public who wish to address councillors at meetings. In 2007, the last time the Procedural By-law was reviewed, council of the day opted to reduce the 10 minutes allowed for delegations to council to five minutes. The council of the day also put a curfew on council meetings. It decided to end meetings at 11 p.m. Council could then vote to extend the meeting or agree to resume at another time on another day.

While some municipalities limit the number of delegations permitted to address council and committee at each meeting, Clarington staff state in the report, "All members of the public should be afforded to address their members of council if they so choose." Staff does not recommend limiting the number of delegations on a given matter; however, they recommend the Chair may consider encouraging the delegates to limit their comments.

Councillor Mary Novak asked staff at Monday's meeting if there was any way to move delegations to another day. "If there are 25 delegations and you know you are not going to finish, is there a way to have delegations continue the next day?" Novak asked. She said she was looking for ways, so "that we don't find ourselves at 3 o'clock in the morning making substantive decisions." According to Novak, five minutes per delegation was appropriate to help councillors manage their time.

Councillors recommended amendments be made to the draft procedural by-law presented on Monday. The two more significant changes were: that council and staff be restricted from using electronic communication devices during council and committee meetings; and that all meetings of council be held in Clarington.

Councillor Novak introduced the amendment prohibiting the use of BlackBerrys in council chambers during council hours. "I find it distracting, I find it uncomfortable," stated Novak. "All of us need to pay 100 percent to what is happening," she said.

Councillors Joe Neal and Corinna Traill objected to the proposed amendment. Neal said while he might have seen the odd person looking at their BlackBerrys during council meetings, he has not seen anyone actually using them during the meeting. Neal said he did not want to be told to shut his handheld communication device off during meetings in case he needed to refer to something on the spot. "I don't want a rule prohibiting me from doing that," he stated, while he did agree the ringer on the device should be turned off.

Councillor Traill also did not support the proposed amendment as she could be receiving questions from concerned residents and updating facebook during council meetings.

In early December, newly elected council and senior staff held a special council meeting in the form of an orientation, which was held over three days at a resort 30 minutes north of Peterborough.

Councillor Neal said he expressed his concern at the time that the meeting was being held outside of Clarington, from both a convenience and expense stand point. If the meeting was held in Clarington, local businesses could have benefited. Furthermore, as a practising lawyer, Neal said he was not given enough notice of the meeting - five to six weeks - to be able to clear his schedule, -so he was unable to attend portions of the meeting. "It involved a lot of driving back and forth," Neal said, "I would have liked to have been there for the entire session."

"There is a history in the Municipality of having orientation meetings off-site," declared Mayor Foster. "The point of doing this once every four years is that it takes us away from our BlackBerrys and cell phones, to spend time with Department Heads and get to know each other a bit better."

Council will determine next week whether to approve the changes to the by-law.