

Dickens ward vacancy discussed at South Algonquin committee meeting

By Mike Riley

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At the South Algonquin Human Resources/Administration/Public Relations committee meeting on Aug. 25, Bryan Martin, the CAO/clerk-treasurer, provided an update on the ongoing search and selection process to fill the Dickens Ward vacancy left by former Councillor Joe Vermaire, who resigned on July 27. So far, they have three applicants for the position and will be determining how they interview them, in an open or closed session, before selecting a candidate after the Aug. 31 deadline.

At their Aug. 4 council meeting, South Algonquin council voted to select a replacement for Vermaire, instead of holding a by-election. It was felt that avoiding a by election with only 16 months to go before a general municipal election would be more cost effective and more expedient than having a by election.

At the Aug. 25 HR/Admin/PR meeting, Councillor Sandra Collins, the chair of the committee, asked Martin for an update on the vacancy in Dickens ward and what sort of response they had gotten toward filling the vacant seat.

"I know there's been a letter from the president of the Aylen Lake Community Association [Sandra Gates] that requested that the person selected lives in the area because only people living there seem to know what's going on," she says.

Collins then passed the floor over to Martin for his update. He said he'd had three applications to date and all three were from Dickens ward, to the best of his knowledge.

"The legislation does not prohibit anyone from outside Dickens ward putting their name forward. The selection process is up to council. I did send out a bit of a questionnaire that you could use. However, if you didn't want to, and council just wanted to pick a couple of questions to ask the individual, that would alright as well," he says.

Martin said they needed to set up a specific time and place for doing this interview, and due to it being a councillor and not a member of staff, it could be done in a public forum, versus in a closed session.

Councillor Richard Shalla suggested going with the selection process based on the applicants' cover letter and CV and that it might be better in the long run.

"I'd feel more comfortable if council was aware we reviewed what was submitted and select them based on that and I think that's how it was done in the past," he says.

Councillor Bongo Bongo said he loved the idea of having the interviews public on Zoom where the public can see the applicants and who they are.

"If this could be done in a public forum, I think that would be fantastic. And we'd see how the candidates perform on this technological forum we use. I think that would provide us a lot of information on the candidates' competency being public speakers," he says.

Bongo said he fully respected Shalla's assertion that the cover letter and CV would be enough to select a new councillor, but he said he'd be more comfortable and confident making an appointment decision if they could have both of those things; the cover letter and CV and the public interview process.

"I would want to set that up as soon as possible so long as the majority of council agrees," he says.

Collins said she agreed with Bongo somewhat, but wasn't sure she wanted to subject the applicants to a public interview, nor was she sure they'd want to partake in such a public forum at this point.

?When you apply for a job, you don't want to let everyone know you didn't get the job. I think it's a little bit of a difficult situation,? she says.

Mayor Jane Dumas agreed, saying a public interview could be quite intimidating to some people, and they should be respectful of that.

She said that some applicants may not want people to know that they've applied at this point, as they may want to run in the 2022 municipal election.

?I'm a little leery of putting people in that situation of being part of an interview that is recorded on YouTube and open to the public. I don't know that I would support that process,? she says.

In response to Shalla's query, Collins recalled that she'd been selected by council for her seat by an interview.

?I believe I was selected by my submission letter and there were 10 people overall, and that was obviously discussed at council and I was selected and interviewed,? she says.

Dumas confirmed Collins' recollection of her selection to council.

?I think time is of the essence and we'd like to get someone at the table as soon as possible. I would recommend that we do as [Shalla] suggested and get the cover letter and CV, select a date and hopefully have a decision by the end of next week or the following week after the long weekend,? she says.

Bongo said that if they didn't do the public interviews, then he strongly suggested doing them privately, as he would feel more confident having both the cover letters and CVs and the input from the interviews to make an informed decision.

?I really hope that's what we decide to do. And I'm sure we can organize that in a pretty timely fashion as well,? he says.

Martin told Bancroft This Week on Aug. 26 that once he gets clarity from council on the process, he'll be able to divulge more information on the type of interviews they'll be conducting.

?At the moment, they may be dealt with in a closed session, in which case I will be providing the name of the successful individual [who'll be the new councillor for Dickens ward]. Stay tuned,? he says. ?I'll advise as soon as I know more.?