

Hastings Highlands decides to keep question period

By Nate Smelle

The following are a series of reports from the Wednesday, Jan. 21 meeting of Council for the Municipality of Hastings Highlands.

To allow questions from the public or not to allow questions from the public, that was the big question of the day at the Jan. 21 meeting of council in Hastings Highlands. The debate on whether or not to continue the approximately 10 minute long public question period allowed for at the end of each council meeting, was raised at the Dec. 10 meeting of council, when Councillor Hald Robinson put forth a notice of motion proposing that council put a stop to receiving questions from the public at future council meetings.

Robinson said he decided to put forth the motion regarding the future of the public's question period after taking part in a training session provided by the AMO, where the facilitator suggested that questions from the public could be disruptive, embarrassing and time consumptive.

'Let me make it clear, I'm not against accepting questions from the public for information purposes or clarification of items already decided or discussed on the day's agenda,' said Robinson.

'This is been an agreed format on holding a question period. My problem is that it's not being followed. What I'm concerned about is the lack of control. In allowing what starts out to be a valid question to turn into a debate with open opinions being offered from the floor, and criticisms of Council's decisions, this allows the public question to turn into a public forum to which the general public has not been invited, and therefore have no opportunity to have their say in the discussion. Instead those who choose to attend Council meetings feel free to attempt to influence or change council's decisions by arguing their own platform or opinion.'

Before Council could cast their vote community activist and candidate in the 2014 municipal election, Keith Buck took the floor to urge Council not to support this motion.

'This is a problem we don't have; so how does this Council deal with questions from the public?' asked Buck.

'Well... questions are all scheduled for the end of the agenda and all questions must be related to an item on the agenda. This is respectful, time effective and it also creates a dialogue between Council and ratepayers. Leading up to the previous election in 2014 most members of this Council supported a rare degree of transparency, and a more informed and more involved ratepayer. Allowing questions from the public supports both these agendas.'

Councillor Greg Roberts also believes that Council should continue to allow the question period from the public. Instead of viewing it as a distraction to the political process, he considers the public question period as a good way to get important issues on the table in a timely fashion. Roberts also sees it as an effective way for the council to remain transparent.

'Concerned and interested ratepayers are taking the time to attend meetings to get questions answered; questions are important to clarify their concerns,' said Roberts.

'Time management I think is used well in this case, that they don't have to come back at another time, and in that they are getting their answers or at least we can get the answer for them at that point in time. It is worked in my opinion very well in the past to get as much info as possible, especially on the controversial items that we have had to deal with in the past few years.'

After discussing both the advantages and disadvantages of allowing questions from the public at future council meetings the motion was put to a vote. In the end the motion was defeated.

Canada Day 2015?

Since last year's cancellation of the Canada Day celebrations in Bancroft there have been many conversations taking place in regards to what the plans are for July 1, 2015. The town of Bancroft has sent out a request to the surrounding municipalities for each to provide a \$500 donation, along with a letter in support of Bancroft's application for the Celebrate Canada/Heritage Funding. If successful, as the official applicants for the funding Bancroft will play host to the 2015 Canada Day celebrations. Funding could be awarded up to \$40,000.

"We've got to start sometime in Maynooth to have something for Canada Day," said Councillor Bert Cannon.

"We are promoting Bancroft and that's fine and dandy, but we've got to start somewhere. I mean that's a whole bunch of money, why couldn't we do some little thing for this community?"

"I know you don't like to hear it but Bancroft is the hub," Roberts responded.

"Tourism comes there and then spreads out. Just for your information purposes, their fireworks display costs \$2,100 a minute and it lasts about an hour."

Council was in agreement in regards to writing the letter of support for the funding application, however, after discussing the initiative the majority decided to set the amount of the donation at budget time.

"I don't want to change it," said Roberts "I would rather make the \$500 donation. It's a very inexpensive way to end up with a fireworks display for people in this area."

Although the Canada Day event would be held in Bancroft it would still be considered a municipal event for Hastings Highlands and the other participating municipalities.

Children Playing signs approved for ANAF Road

Residents on ANAF Road submitted a request to council for "Children Playing" signs to be erected at the corner of Hwy. 62 and ANAF Road and at the dead-end of the road. The ratepayers are concerned about speeding vehicles of all types posing a threat to children in the neighbourhood. Council acknowledged the potential risk and agreed to put up the new signs.

Fire chief's report

Fire Chief Pat Hoover provided counsel with the final fire report for 2014 during this Council session.

He reported that the fire service were called out to a total of 76 calls in 2014, which was up from last year but in line with previous years averages for calls. The fire service's annual budget came in less than projected, with the tally coming in less than expected on some items, and with others more.