

Hastings Highlands hearing postponed



Ontario Municipal Board member Hugh Wilkins informs Hastings Highlands ratepayers and staff that the hearing for council's decision to vote at-large in the 2018 election is moved to Nov. 7 and 8. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

The Ontario Municipal Board has moved Hastings Highlands's at-large voting decision hearing to November.

The board held a prehearing Oct. 5, following a last minute decision to review if the public had received proper notice of it. CAO Pat Pilgrim said municipal staff received notice from the board that the hearing's agenda had changed the day before.

The municipality had to give the public around a month's notice of the hearing. The municipality missed this deadline by a ?few days,? according to Pilgrim. She said the reason for this was ?inadvertent.?

?The day that we realized that the notice hadn't been sent, [the OMB] had sent us an email stating that [it] was going to proceed,? said Pilgrim. ?The OMB has the right to make that decision.?

The scheduled two-day hearing was to discern if the municipality's decision to change from wards to at-large voting to equalize voter parity earlier this year would stand for the 2018 election.

Pilgrim told the prehearing that the public had received proper notice. With her lawyers, Jennifer Savini and Samantha Foster from Belleville's Templeman Menninga LLP Municipal Group, she presented more than a dozen exhibits of public notice to OMB member Hugh Wilkins.

?We sent the notices the way you're supposed to,? Pilgrim told *Bancroft This Week* after the prehearing.

Former mayor Brent Dagleish, who petitioned the board for the hearing, argued that if proper notice had been given to the public, the Hastings Highlands Community Centre would have been full. As it was, there were some 50 people in attendance. He said the centre had been full for municipal issues in the past.

wanted the hearing moved to a time when more residents could attend. The crowd was with him, applauding when spring and summer dates were suggested for seasonal residents.

Dan Ralph, a cottager from Kamaniskeg Lake, told *Bancroft This Week* that seasonal residents represented two-thirds of the ratepayers in Hastings Highlands. He said having a hearing on a workday and when many had closed up their cottage for the year, didn't make sense.

Wilkins wouldn't hear the public. He set the date for Nov. 7 and 8. Dagleish pointed out these dates were during hunting season, another priority for area ratepayers, but to no avail.

Some people who signed up to participate in the hearing after its new date was chosen also noted many residents were ?snow birds?

? retired or senior residents who winter in Flordia or other warm places.

Wilkins noted that ratepayers could write in to be heard at the hearing, and, in addition, the municipality said it would look into setting up a telephone line for residents to call during the hearing.

Pilgrim said more than 10 members of the public signed up as participants for the hearing.

?I think it was split between staying the way we are and going at-large from the people that we heard yesterday,? said Pilgrim of her impression of what the attending public would like to see as a result of the hearing.

Pilgrim said Wilkins didn't leave until late in that day following the prehearing. They were going over the notices that the municipality would send out so they were approved by the OMB.

Consultants Gary Davidson and Beate Bowron are expected to attend the hearing. They advised the municipality to make a change to fix voter parity in March, warning there was a high likelihood the board would force it to if it did nothing. The pair also warned that the board could award costs to the municipality including the costs to the petitioners and the hearings.

So far, Pilgrim said, the municipality has the costs of the lawyers and the consultants to pay. She couldn't identify how much that would be yet.

?You have to bring an expert to the hearing, you have to defend your position,? she said.

Pilgrim said she assumed because the municipality had acted it wouldn't be awarded further costs.

This was after the first petition on voter parity was submitted to council. This hearing follows a second petition against the municipality's at-large voting bylaw, which was passed as a solution to the first petition.

?Once we receive the petition we have to do something about it? They complained that we were doing it in the winter but really, the section in the Municipal Act states that we have to do something in 90 days,? said Pilgrim.

She didn't suspect that there would be more or less participants depending on the time of year.

?We have people that come to most council meetings? It's usually the same people whether it's winter or summer.?