

OMB let's at-large voting stand

By Sarah Sobanski

The Ontario Municipal Board has announced that Hastings Highlands will vote at-large in 2018.

Council passed a bylaw to vote at-large ? as opposed to voting within wards ? in the spring to ensure voter parity amongst its constituents.

The decision was petitioned by former mayor Brent Dalgleish in the summer. He said many disagreed with the decision and that the municipality wanted the wards system to remain. He argued constituents would have fought the decision harder had they known about it.

The board held a two-day hearing following the appeal in early November. Its conclusion was released Dec. 12.

?Based on the evidence before it, the board finds that a proper process was undertaken by council when making its decision to pass the bylaw. The board notes that there are no statutory provisions requiring that a specific process be followed or public notice be given before a bylaw is passed; however, the process must be fair. The municipality made significant efforts to raise public awareness and engage the public on the issue,? according to the decision document.

?The board finds that there are no clear and compelling reasons to interfere with the decision of council. The board finds that several options were considered by council, opportunities for public inputs were given, and professional advice was sought and provided and, given the uncontested expert evidence before the board that the bylaw will achieve effective representation, the board finds that the decision of council was reasonable.?

In conclusion it added, ?The board finds that the dissolution of the ward structure as set out in the bylaw provides for effective representation. The decision made by council to adopt the bylaw was fair and reasonable. The fact that there may be other options is not a basis for the board to interfere with the structure that the duly elected council has determined is best for the municipality,? according to the decision document.