

An open letter to Tudor and Cashel council

Dear Mayor Libby Clarke,

Enclosed with my 2021 interim tax bill, I received a one page questionnaire on the subject of the township's possible move to a system of electoral wards vs. the tried and proven practice of electing all members of council at-large. I feel that this questionnaire was hastily prepared and ill-considered, but as someone who has been following this issue as it has been developing over the past several months, I felt compelled to respond to it as best as I could.

Please find my responses to the attached questionnaire with my expanded response to the final question six in particular.

Questions:

1. Which area do you live in? I have marked the question as Not Applicable. I do not live in, nor do I associate with any of the historic village names listed as possible answers. I understand that this question was likely intended to gauge which of the potential wards being considered that a respondent would belong to, but given that the actual final boundaries have not even been identified, I found it impossible to choose any of these choices.

I am a seasonal resident of the Township of Tudor and Cashel, and by wording this question with only the three options given as answers, it suggests that only full-time residents of one of these three villages matter. Surely I do not need to remind you that seasonal residents who hold property in the Township are equally entitled to vote in all municipal elections.

2. Did you participate in the 2018 election? I marked this question as irrelevant! What possible difference could it make whether a constituent of the Township voted in a previous election? Though I am a firm believer in exercising one's democratic right to vote, people may have many different reasons for not voting either for personal circumstances or simply because they did not feel any of the candidates were worthy of holding office, or that it doesn't matter which candidate gets elected, that council never listens to voters or addresses their needs or concerns. I have heard complaints like these before. By raising this question, it sends a signal to the respondent that if you didn't vote in the last election, their opinions on this and future issues do not matter.

3. Were you familiar with all of the candidates in the 2018 election? I answered, Yes. But here again, I do not see the relevance of the question or how it might have any bearing on the question of whether the township should adopt ward-based electoral boundaries. There is certainly no evidence to suggest that introducing a ward system would make information about the candidates more readily available to voters.

As always, it is up to a candidate to make themselves, their qualifications and their platform known to constituents. Having witnessed no fewer than four municipal elections in the Township of Tudor and Cashel, I have to say that this is an area that all candidates and the Township could and should do much better at. I cannot recall any all-candidates meetings in the past few elections, and I have never received any literature from any candidate in the past. Indeed, only one candidate has ever come to my property to present themselves and asked for my support, and that was in the 2018 election.

4. Do you feel that establishing wards based on geographic areas would provide a fair and even representation of the population during the election process? I answered, No. Although I believe that wards can be a useful tool to help better support the constituents of a municipality, this is only true in much larger municipalities with much larger, and denser populations. Wards are more frequently found in large urban areas like cities where access to an elected representative could be difficult when there are many thousands of voters trying to get a councillor's time and attention.

Councillor Bridger was correct during the first discussion of this topic, that in a very small, sparsely populated township like Tudor and Cashel, the issues of importance to constituents and voters are always the same; roads, waste management, fire services and taxes.

5. Do you favour electing councillors by ward or at-large? I answered At-large

6. My reasons: I believe that electoral wards are neither necessary nor appropriate in the Township of Tudor and Cashel.

For as long as I have owned land in the township, there has always been this unspoken under current of division between year-round residents and seasonal residents. This can best be described as the 'Us vs. Them' mentality. This kind of division is detrimental to the wellbeing of the township and it is counter-productive. Council's primary goal should be to work for the collective good of all residents of the township, regardless what area of the township those residents are from or whether they reside there year round or spend their time between more than one place. The preamble to this survey even sets out this expectation saying that 'once elected, Councillors are to represent the Township for the betterment of the whole of the municipality and not the area in which they were elected alone.' In which case, what is the point?

The argument that wards allow better access to an elected representative does not hold true in such a small township or in these modern times where all one has to do is pick up a phone, or write a letter or an email. Rather than to look to far off examples of municipalities which have or are moving to electoral wards, like Orillia or similar, council would be far better served by looking at examples within their own county, where only Trent Hills and Tyendinaga still use wards. I believe it was Hastings Highlands that decided by referendum in the 2018 election to do away with wards.

As evidenced in the earliest recorded discussions of council when the question of wards was first introduced, it is clear that at least for some current members of Council, this is more about securing their future re-election than on better representing the interests of voters.

Looking back at past elections where so few candidates put their names forward for election, it is easy to see that electing three of the five members of council based on the ward they choose to run in, could lead to some wards not being competed for or more seats on Council being decided by acclamation or appointment. Neither of these outcomes gives rise to a more democratic process. Any attempt to manipulate the electoral process in order to gain an unfair advantage politically is simply gerrymandering, and should be denounced immediately!

With so few candidates coming forward to run in our municipal elections, it only makes sense to allow every voter in the township the opportunity to choose the very best to serve as members of council and that they feel would best represent the interests of the whole township. Ideally, the most qualified candidates would get elected, not only the most strategic.

In a year where a global pandemic has caused so much difficulty and economic hardship to so many people, council's primary concern should be how best to serve their Township and its constituents, rather than finding new ways to tinker with an election process that has functioned for over a century.

Rather than fighting over the few votes that currently determine an election, every member of council should be working to increase the level of participation in our elections. Engage voters with your deeds and accomplishments and stop wasting time bickering over what is fashionable to some and deplorable to others.

As I stated initially, I am not in favour of an electoral ward system in the Township of Tudor and Cashel, but if this council is determined to test those waters, I would expect that this issue truly be decided democratically by all voters of the Township by way of a referendum either this year or in the 2022 election. Here again, there are far more pressing issues that this council should be seized with and that tax payers dollars should be used for.

If the majority of all eligible voters in the township favoured the introduction of clearly defined wards, than I still wouldn't like it, but I could accept it as the will of the people, rather than a self-serving manoeuvre by a few.

Sincerely, and as always, with the best interests of all the Township,

Pat Stallaert Steenburg Lake