

System must change: consultant

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings Highlands council met with consultants Gary Davidson and Beate Bowron March 9 to see what could be done to equalize voter parity in Hastings Highlands. Ward 3 has less than half the population of Ward 1 but has the same number of council seats. It was petitioned to change its electoral system to at-large voting, or rework its ward boundaries, in early January.

According to consultants, petitioners have fair grounds to call upon the Ontario Municipal Board to make council change its electoral system. If council does nothing, the board would most likely hold a hearing if the petition was submitted.

Consultants presented council with three options to make its electoral system fair.

First, they could reduce the number of councillors in Monteagle Ward to one and elect the deputy mayor at large. This would bring voter parity within 10 per cent equal representation throughout all three wards.

Jurisprudence runs around how many people a councillor represents. If you have Herschel, for example, which has two councillors, but you divide two into the number of people and it's the same as Monteagle then that's fine. The board has no issue with that," said Davidson.

Another option is to vote at large for each council seat. Mayor Vivian Bloom pointed out that Hastings Highlands is close to voting at large already as people can run for council in whichever ward they choose.

The consultants noted that each of these previous options could be implemented by 2018. Once they were implemented, the OMB would have limited grounds to interfere.

The last option was to undertake a ward boundary review. Davidson and Bowron said they had considered population growth for the area and new boundaries would last for several elections before, or if, voter parity became an issue again. They said it was unlikely new wards could be drawn up by 2018 and that implementing new wards would cost over \$25,000.

The waiting period before the petition could be submitted to the OMB passed March 16. However, the consultants suggested that if council were shown to be working on the issue, the OMB would not interfere unless the issue was left unchecked, regardless of if the petition was submitted.

If council is pursuing a course of action to solve the problem, council informs the board of that and the board wouldn't hold a hearing. They would let council go through that. Once council passes a bylaw that changed the governing structure then the petition is no longer valid," said Davidson.

Deputy Mayor Gregg Roberts asked consultants if council could leave the system as is if it was what the people want. He noted council has had a hard time gathering feedback for the issue and that those who had signed the petition made up a small part of eligible voters. He wanted to know if the OMB would take that into account.

The short answer is no they won't. The reason for that is what you're dealing with is an issue under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The right to vote, as we have pointed out, supersedes virtually everything," replied Davidson. The fact that people don't mind if there's a system that over represents some people over other people the board doesn't take that into consideration. The board will only look at whether or not you've achieved voter parity."

He added, "It's just like if everyone said they didn't want speed limits on the roads, you'd still have to have them."

Bowron said voter parity wasn't a "sexy" issue. Lack of interest was common.

In all the projects that we have been involved with there are a number of people who are really interested in the subject, and then there are a whole bunch of other people that are not interested," Bowron told council.

The consultants warned that if council considered public input and kept its current system the voter parity issue would remain. They suggested the OMB could impose a solution and award costs to the municipality such as hearing costs and paying the petitioners for their costs.