

Former mayor appeals to OMB

By Sarah Sobanski

The Ontario Municipal Board is reviewing Hastings Highlands council's at-large voting decision.

Former mayor of Hastings Highlands Brent Dalglish submitted a letter of appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board. He's against council's decision to vote at-large for the 2018 election and wants the wards system back in place.

"I'm a voice for the people," said Dalglish who was the last reeve of Bangor, Wicklow, and McClure before it amalgamated into Hastings Highlands. He was also the first mayor of the amalgamated municipality.

"We agonized long and hard, and put a lot of thought, into the amalgamation process... The at-large was totally rejected as the poorest and the weakest system. It really doesn't guarantee close representation to the people."

Mayor Vivian Bloom confirmed the OMB had notified council it was investigating the decision.

"The OMB will begin a process to look at how and why council made their decision [and] if all due process was followed, which it was," said Bloom.

Council voted to change its voting system earlier this year to achieve voter parity after it was petitioned just before Christmas. All wards had two councillors to represent them even though Ward 3 had a significantly smaller population - meaning votes from electors in Ward 3 held more weight in the election process.

The deadline to submit an appeal to the OMB was June 5 - the day Dalglish gave his letter to the municipality. He said at-large voting makes sense for small municipalities but not for a large municipality such as Hastings Highlands.

"It will take an hour and a quarter for a person to drive from one end of our municipality to the other end if they obey the speed limits," he said, wary of councillor travel costs going up if at-large voting elects all councillors from one area of the municipality who have to support ratepayers at an opposite area.

"Residents can call in and lodge a specific complaint or tell of a problem and our staff deal with it in a specified time if it is something that can be quickly fixed. There should not be council members driving and putting in mileage to look at a washout or problem. That is staff's job," argued Bloom. "Some council members put in for mileage to come to meetings, some do not. This was another cost to taxpayers brought in years ago by Mr. Dalglish. It is unheard of in other municipalities for council members to be paid to come to their own meetings."

Dalglish said another issue with at-large voting is it could allow groups within the municipality to stack the ballot box. He noted large populations previously divided by wards such as Ward 1 and cottage associations.

"It's too easy for there to be a vested interest group that they run their slate of candidates, if they're fortunate enough to get their slate in, then suddenly we have council being governed, controlled by such a group," said Dalglish. "Keeping the ward system, three wards, ratepayers, the common man, is guaranteed hey, I'm going to have two councillors from my ward who I probably know or they're not too far away and they will respond to my need and concerns."

Council could have elected to remove a councillor from Ward 3. This however, would have created a six-member council. Without an odd number of council members stalemates could occur during council meetings - there would be no deciding vote, which usually falls to the mayor.

"No area will suffer under an at-large council," said Bloom. "It should not matter where a person lives in Hastings Highlands, as when you run for council, you become a council member who makes the decisions based on fact, cost, need and read the staff recommendations and priorities. We all work as one for the best results for all of the people, all of the time."

Council had 90 days to act on the voter parity petition before it would be sent to the OMB. Consultants suggested that if council left the wards system as it was, the OMB would hold a hearing and find the system unfair. Council would then be forced to make a decision as well as pay for the hearing for remaining inactive.

"Now, it will very likely be a costly legal bill for Hastings Highlands coming from the OMB, which council had hoped could be avoided by following due process and the wishes of the residents in our municipality."