

South Algonquin council makes electronic meetings permanent

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By Mike Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

South Algonquin Township voted to amend their bylaws and allow the option of permanent electronic meetings of council going forward at their Aug. 19 special meeting of council. These amendments were courtesy of Schedule 12 of Bill 197, part of the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act 2020. Based upon discussions at their Aug. 5 regular council meeting, while they had intended to have an additional discussion and vote on proxy voting at this meeting, they decided to defer it and may revisit the issue in the future. Mayor Jane Dumas explained at the start of the meeting that the closed session, originally scheduled to deal with a drainage issue with a local resident, had been deferred to an asset management meeting to be held at a later date.

The council proceeded to discuss amending the bylaws to allow the council the option to conduct electronic meetings permanently. This amendment is courtesy of Schedule 12 of Bill 197, part of the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act 2020, which was an initiative by the Ontario government to help the province's financial recovery and recognizes the key role that municipalities play in that successful rebound from the effects of COVID-19. The bylaws in question are 20-610, which is to be rescinded, and 20-607, which is to be amended, by having Section 2.5 removed. Schedule C will be added, to allow for permanent electronic participation of councillors in council meetings.

Mayor Dumas commended township staff for their work in compiling all the information for this bylaw change, and noted that it had to be passed so they can continue on with electronic meetings during COVID-19 and beyond.

Holly Hayes, the clerk for South Algonquin Township, summarized the staff report that had been provided to council prior to the meeting. She said that the Ontario government had passed Bill 197 which allowed municipal governments to continue with electronic meetings during the next phases of COVID-19 and beyond. She said that they were looking to rescind bylaw 20-610, which was passed in March, to allow for electronic meetings through COVID-19 and the state of emergency declared by the province. There is also a recommendation to put in Schedule C, which is a clear layout of how townships will go forward if this bylaw passes.

Hayes said that section 2.5 was put into place back in February, and that it was a section that stated that a member of council, a local board or a committee, could participate electronically in a meeting, which is open to the public, but they didn't count for quorum and they weren't able to vote. With the amendment to allow for permanent electronic meetings, this will no longer be the case, and members of council participating via electronic meetings will be allowed to vote and count for quorum.

Removing this from the bylaw will allow for Schedule C to be enacted. Schedule C states that pursuant to Section 238 (3.3) of the Municipal Act, 2001, members of council, committees or local boards may participate in electronic meetings, that those attending will count toward quorum (having at least four council members present to vote a majority) and are able to vote. In the event that connectivity is lost resulting in loss of quorum, the meeting will recess until quorum can be met. If reconnection cannot be made after 10 minutes, the meeting will be rescheduled. Members participating electronically may participate in closed meetings, but must participate in such a way that the confidentiality of said meetings is maintained. The head of council or delegate and/or the clerk may chair a meeting electronically, and members are expected to maintain etiquette as is expected in council chambers during in-person meetings.

Proxy voting, which was supposed to have been discussed and voted on at this meeting, was deferred, at the recommendation of Hayes, to a further discussion about its impact and the challenges of implementing it. It may be discussed and voted upon at a later date.

Councillor Joe Florent noted that in regard to the notice of meetings, the bylaw stated that it was exclusive on non-business days

(weekends), and recommended it should read inclusive of non business days instead. He was more concerned about it as it pertained to committee meetings versus regular council meetings. Hayes agreed with him and said she would have Carla Gatley, the township's deputy clerk, change the wording.

Councillor Richard Shalla had a suggestion that the agenda packages should indicate that the meetings will be held electronically as they are now informing people they are being held in person at the municipal office. Hayes agreed it was a good point, but said there will be public participation at the office if the public chooses to watch there or via computer at the office.

?It will technically still be held at this office, but there should be some indication that it will be online as well,? she said.

She said that the information on the agendas will be modified going forward.

Councillor Bongo Bongo asked that if a closed session was not broadcast on YouTube, would they still need to reactivate YouTube to have the final vote to adjourn the meeting. Hayes responded that they were not doing this up to now, but she would look at ways to do so on YouTube going forward. Hayes noted that the vote for the meeting adjournment would still be contained within the official minutes so would be available to the public, even if it was not available on YouTube. However, Councillor Shalla brought up the fact that if there's a vote to adjourn the meeting, there could be some important discussions, that the public should be privy to and maybe interested in.

Mayor Dumas conceded this was a good point and asked Hayes to see how they could have the last part of the meetings on YouTube as well. Hayes said she'll talk to other councils and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing about how to do this.

Councillor Bongo requested a chance to speak, and he said that he thinks these electronic meetings are the way of the future.

?And I also think that this connects council and the township with the constituency in a more effective way than in person meetings do. I think already, through the visitation numbers to the YouTube videos, you can see attendance so far. I've been really enjoying these electronic meetings and I look forward to continuing them,? he said.

The mayor thanked him and agreed with him on this. She reiterated to those watching on YouTube that all documents including agendas and meeting minutes could be accessed on the township website. Councillor Joe Vermaire asked to speak next and wanted to echo the comments of Councillor Bongo.

?Because of my location, the mileage costs for me over the past year have been substantial, and I can see this as a great savings for the constituents as well,? he said.

Mayor Dumas thanked him for his feedback, and went on to note that she had noticed from other online meetings she'd seen that headsets and other audio-visual equipment were being used for meeting participants to hear and speak better at said meetings. She asked Hayes to look into that. Hayes said it was a great idea and that the funding was available from the government to possibly invest in more audio-visual equipment to facilitate continued electronic meetings.

She would look into doing that and offering up a resolution to that effect in the next council meeting package.

Mayor Dumas offered that they also have a new IT person, so they could help the council set all that up in a timely and efficient manner. ?He would probably be able to help people such as myself who are technologically challenged, so that would be excellent. I think it would make everyone feel more comfortable with the process,? she said. With that, the council voted to amend the bylaws, thus making permanent electronic meetings part of South Algonquin township council's legislative process. This was moved by Councillor Bongo, seconded by Councillor Vermaire and passed by council.

While the bylaw amendment was passed unanimously by council, there were some dissenting views of it after the fact. Councillor Florent, who voted for the bylaw amendment, is now having second thoughts.

?I don't like it at all. It's not what I signed up for. I am okay with broadcasting the meetings on YouTube. I think the intent of the changing of the bylaw was to make electronic meetings possible in other than declared emergency situations, but I fear we may be doing meetings electronically permanently. I certainly hope not. To be honest, I don't feel that Councillors were given time to review the bylaw before the vote. The way it was presented, I felt that if we didn't accept it, we couldn't carry on business as a council. In hindsight, I probably should have been more vocal against it,? he says.

On the other hand, Councillor Sandra Collins still thinks it's a great idea and acknowledges the savings to constituents in terms of paper, ink, and postage from having conducted the meetings electronically up to now and going into the future. She says this also made the council ready for the decision to make them permanent.

?I believe that electronic meetings are very productive and by continuing the YouTube feed, it allows the public to listen in and have knowledge of what's going on, thereby making our council meetings open and inclusive. The savings in travel expenses will offset some of the initial costs incurred in the purchasing of council members' preferred devices,? she says. Hayes was also happy with the way the meeting went.

?I think that having the option [of having electronic meetings permanently] is a great tool for municipalities.?