

South Algonquin councillor votes in favour of byelection



By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

South Algonquin Township council voted to appoint former Councillor Joe Vermaire's successor at their Aug. 4 meeting versus having a byelection to fill the now vacant seat. The only councillor that voted in favour of a byelection was Councillor Bongo Bongo, and he explains to Bancroft This Week why he voted for a byelection instead of an appointment.

Vermaire resigned from his duties as councillor representing Dickens Ward on July 27. At the next council meeting on Aug. 4, council and staff discussed the best alternatives to filling the vacant council seat. While most of the council voted in favour of appointing Vermaire's replacement to save money and staff time, as well as acknowledging that the next general election is only 16 months away, Bongo voted against this route, and was in favour of a byelection.

Bongo acknowledges that administratively it is more convenient to appoint a new councillor, it is perfectly legal and council is not doing anything wrong against the Municipal Act. He also acknowledges that they are not losing staff time to an extra election at the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark of this council's term, and they're not drawing on their election reserve funds and he wholeheartedly accepts the majority's decision on this issue.

?My concern with appointing a councillor, however, is that it is not technically democratic. The constituency will be getting a new

council representative chosen by us, the councillors. This is just my opinion, but it doesn't feel right to me. It is a matter of principle. I would rather give the power of choice to the people, the voters, not to the current council members in power. Yes, a byelection would use up staff time and financial resources, although from my perspective it would be more democratically responsible. What happens if we choose a councillor that the public disapproves of? Without a doubt, our staff will guide us properly throughout the application process, but ultimately, I think a byelection would alleviate a lot of critical questions regarding fairness, he says.

Although Bongo says he looks forward to the application process, and he's happy that a new member of the community will join council without the hassle of a byelection, he says he is personally uncomfortable with the power given to him to choose that new colleague. He says that many constituents, from what he has heard, are frustrated that five out of seven positions on council are acclaimed, and in the case of Vermaire's now vacant seat, once again the people of Dickens ward will not be able to vote for a candidate versus an acclamation or now an appointment.

I would love it if the cycle of 'no elections' was broken. Let's see what happens in 2022. I dream of a flood of applicants, riding on a wave of civic engagement. That to me would be an ideal democracy, he says.

Bongo reiterates that he accepts the majority decision on this matter and he will enthusiastically participate in the application process for council, regardless of the personal beliefs that he's expressed.

On the plus side, the lack of an election makes the position more attainable to a larger pool of candidates. In fact, if there is anyone out there in South Algonquin that is interested in municipal politics, but you aren't confident about committing to four years or running a daunting election campaign, this appointment is a fantastic opportunity! We have an amazing staff, an incredible landscape, great people, and a bright future. I wanted to be part of it, and now there's an opportunity for another community member to experience this special opportunity, he says.

Anyone interested in the vacant council seat is asked to contact Bryan Martin, the CAO/clerk-treasurer, by email at clerk@southalgonquin.ca or by fax at 613-637-5368 by the deadline of Aug. 31 at 3 p.m.