

Ward populations creating elections imbalance

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings Highlands council is investigating its election process.

Council held a public meeting Nov. 23 to bring locals up to speed on voter discrepancies within its current ward voting system.

Currently, two councillors are elected for each ward. The mayor is elected at large and the deputy mayor is appointed from amongst elected councillors.

Following a delegation made May 4 ? which brought to council's attention there is an imbalance in its election process ? municipal staff was directed to research Hastings Highlands voting system and its fairness.

?I went back to the 2014 election results and also read case studies regarding other municipalities and how the OMB ruled,? said clerk and manager of corporate services Robyn Rogers.

Rogers led the public meeting. She explained council was proactive in directing staff to investigate after the delegation, and in hosting the public meeting, to bring the issue front and centre.

Staff found the population of eligible voters varied by more than 1,500 people between its wards in its 2014 election. This meant votes made in Hastings Highlands' smallest ward carried more weight than in its two larger wards. In 2014, there were 3,048 eligible electors in Ward 1, 2,581 in Ward 2 and 1,483 in Ward 3.

Rogers said Town of Courtney council voted against changing its election processes ? where it created an investigative committee, which recommended that it change its process. It had three wards and a similar population to Hastings Highlands. After the vote, a petition was forwarded to the OMB. The board found that the town neither allowed for equality of voting power nor effective representation. The voter discrepancy in Courtney was smaller than in Hastings Highlands ? around 500.

?We don't know. If council does nothing we could be provided a petition. If we're provided a petition then council will have to do something within 90 days or then it goes forward to the OMB,? said Rogers. Council is better off having the discrepancies brought to its attention to discuss now than waiting for when it will have to. ?It's not something necessarily that council can say oh no we're not dealing with it.?

She added, ?It's totally up to council however, [it] may be forced to actually address it if someone petitions.?

Four proposals were made as a solution to better structure its election system. A fifth was made suggesting council could leave the ward system in place at its discretion with input from the community.

The first proposal presented was to dissolve ward boundaries and implement an at-large voting system. Councillors, like the mayor, would be elected from votes across Hastings Highlands instead of electors only being able to vote for candidates within their wards. The presentation suggested that at-large voting would allow electors to select candidates that they think are best for the job, instead of being limited to the councillors running in their ward. It also stated at-large voting promotes representation of the whole municipality and the concept of a municipality wide focus, rather than individual wards.

Councillor Nancy Matheson and Tracy Hagar later noted that councillors already have a municipality wide focus. Hagar suggested she did her best to represent any constituent who came to her in council, regardless of what ward they were from.

An attendee suggested she had seen councillors from specific wards go head to head on issues and fight for their specific wards in Hastings Highlands before. She seemed weary that without the ward system council could make decisions at the expense of one ward's constituents in favor of the others.

The presentation listed that at-large voting would take away specific voices for individual wards as a disadvantage to the system. It also stated campaigning across the municipality instead of within a ward would mean greater costs for candidates. However, this could make candidates work harder in their campaigns, meaning a better understanding of constituents across the municipality.

The second proposal suggested cutting council down to five members. Three councillors would be elected at large as well as the mayor and the deputy mayor.

The third proposal suggested keeping the ward system but removing a councillor seat from Ward 3 to more accurately represent its smaller population. Both the mayor and the deputy mayor would be elected at large.

The fourth proposal was to realign the ward boundaries. The wards would be divided for equal representation of eligible electors per ward to even out the population discrepancies.

Comment forms were provided at the meeting. They are also available on the Hastings Highlands [website](#). Hastings Highlands residents can submit comments until Feb. 1.