

Committee of the Whole (1) Report

DATE: Monday, July 13, 2020

WARD(S): ALL

TITLE: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

FROM:

Wendy Law, Deputy City Manager, Administrative Services and City Solicitor

ACTION: FOR INFORMATION

Purpose

To provide Council with an update on civic engagement activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Report Highlights

- Electronic meetings have been permitted for all ad-hoc, statutory, Committee and Council meetings
- Public participation is fundamental to democracy
- Deputations can be received through letter, email, phone or computer/smartphone app
- Outreach activities have been undertaken by staff to facilitate civic engagement

Recommendations

1. That this report be received for information.

Background

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of the City, including civic engagement, has been widespread and dramatic. The City of Vaughan has responded in a variety of ways, including the adoption of electronic meetings, along with civic engagement activities to allow for public participation in the decision-making process.

Previous Reports/Authority

Not applicable.

Analysis and Options

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 17, 2020, Mayor Bevilacqua declared a state of Local emergency in accordance with the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act, R.S.O. 1990, c E.9 s.4.(1)* (“EMCPA”) in response to the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to support municipal response and continuity of critical services.

On March 17, 2020, due to the growing public health concerns surrounding the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), the Province declared a province-wide emergency under section 7.0.1 of the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act (“EMCPA”). Since then, the Province has issued various orders that mandated the closure of all recreation facilities, public libraries, child-care centres, and bars and restaurants providing public accommodations in all municipalities across Ontario, and prohibited all organized events with attendance of more than 50 people, in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. On March 28, 2020, a new emergency order prohibited organized public events and social gatherings of more than five people. The limit currently stands at 10 people, and the Province has entered Stage 2 of the recovery plan.

Amendments to Procedure By-law

The Procedure By-law establishes the principles and rules to be used for meetings of Council and its Committees. The Procedure By-law enhances stakeholder participation, community involvement and opportunities for valuable input from the public, other stakeholders and relevant experts on matters that come before Council. The amendments proposed in this report continue to build upon the governance model established by the Procedure By-law.

On March 17, 2020, Council approved amendments to Procedure By-law 7-2011, to facilitate electronic participation at Committee of the Whole and Council meetings on a trial basis. This was done as a proactive measure to allow electronic participation at Committee and Council meetings to the extent possible under the Municipal Act, at that time. Since then, Bill 187 has been enacted by the provincial government, which provides for greater extent of electronic participation than previously permitted.

On March 30, 2020, Council approved further amendments to the Procedure By-law to allow for electronic participation in Committee of the Whole and Council meetings for Council Members, in response to Bill 187, *Municipal Emergency Act, 2020*, during the

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. By-law 033-2020 was passed to make the appropriate amendments to Procedure By-law 7-2011.

Finally, on April 8 2020, Council approved amendments to the Procedure By-law to allow for electronic participation for the statutory, ad hoc and subcommittees, in response to Bill 187, *Municipal Emergency Act, 2020*, during the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Electronic participation in meetings will be permitted for as long as there is a declared state of emergency by either the Province of Ontario or the City of Vaughan. At the time of the drafting of this report, it is our understanding that the Province is considering new legislation to permit electronic meetings permanently and to authorize proxy voting.

The Importance of Public Participation

Public participation is a key component to any meeting of Council or Committee. It is fundamental to democracy to include public input in the decision-making process. Public participation is also required by legislation when considering planning matters.

City staff reviewed the options available for including public participation in electronic meetings, and selected a teleconference solution, keeping in mind that we needed to provide a range of opportunities for people to participate. The solution needed to take into account the variety of abilities of deputants to connect through a teleconference solution, and their access to devices and the internet. For that reason, staff established a minimum requirement for the technology solution that would allow deputants to connect through a regular phone. This was accomplished.

Electronic Deputations

Email and written correspondence are the simplest way for a resident to convey their thoughts on a matter to Council. For those more technically inclined, and those having suitable internet access and devices, a computer/smartphone app provides a way for a resident to have two-way communication with Council. Residents without the technological know-how or those without internet access or devices, a phone-in option is available. Residents are provided a phone number and conference ID and can then join the meeting from a regular phone, and still have the two-way communication with Council.

Presentations have proven to be more difficult to accommodate with the existing technology in the Council Chamber. A programming update, following the scheduled July 15th, 2020 Council meeting, will be undertaken to address this deficiency, thereby

allowing a deputant to be seen by Council while making a deputation and make their own presentation.

As an interim solution, presentations from the public have been accommodated by providing them in advance to the Office of the City Clerk. Staff would work with the deputant to facilitate a presentation by presenting it on their behalf.

While some will see electronic deputations as unable to provide the same experience as being in-person, there are also positives to the use of this technology. Residents unable to attend a meeting at City Hall due to childcare needs, disability, or lack of transportation, just as a few examples, are able to participate in a meeting through teleconferencing.

Suspension and Resumption of Planning Timelines

Ontario Regulation 149/20 (O. Reg. 149/20) was enacted by the Province on April 15th, 2020, which suspended the timelines for decision making and appeals under the *Planning Act*.

On June 12th, 2020, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing advised (Attachment #1) of the Provincial government's intention "to end the temporary suspension of the Planning Act timelines as of June 22nd, 2020." Shortly thereafter, legislation was put in place to put this into effect. In his letter, the Minister acknowledged that the safety of residents must remain a priority, and that provincial restrictions limited public gatherings. They encouraged municipalities to "continue to use electronic and virtual channels, as appropriate, to engage and provide the public with an opportunity to make representations on planning matters, while following the advice of Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health."

With the resumption of the planning timelines it became necessary to begin the scheduling of planning applications, in accordance with the established timelines in the *Planning Act*. Not doing so risked appeals of applications not heard within the required time, and the City of Vaughan Council losing the ability to decide on planning matters on their own.

Communications Outreach to the Public

The Corporate and Strategic Communications Department has been an important partner in engaging the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. Informing the public about upcoming Committee and Council meetings, along with information on how to join the virtual meetings, has been a vital part of civic engagement during the past several months.

The Corporate and Strategic Communications Department, between March and July, issued 111 communication products. These communication products include:

- News releases
- Social media posts
- City Updates
- Council communication packages
- Website banners
- Public service announcements
- Print and online ads

A complete listing of activities can be found in Attachment #2.

Ratepayer Associations and Public Outreach

On June 19th, 2020, the Office of the City Clerk contacted all 22 registered Ratepayer Associations to provide them with information on connecting to public meetings for the purposes of making deputations. Staff recognize that not all potential meeting participants will be familiar with the teleconferencing technology and have offered testing sessions to them. Four associations accepted the offer to practice connecting to a meeting and making a deputation. This offer will be repeated periodically, and staff are available at any time to assist a Ratepayer Association or member of the public with the process of joining an electronic meeting.

In addition to the advance testing, a testing session is hosted by the Office of the City Clerk prior to any Committee meeting where deputations are permitted. This allows registered deputants to confirm that they are able to successfully join an electronic meeting.

Along with the communication efforts, the City's website has been updated to provide specific information for participating in virtual meetings. The "[Speaking to Council](#)" webpage includes information on how to register to make a deputation, and instructions for using the teleconferencing solution.

What will happen in the future?

City staff will continue to monitor the regulations related to public gatherings. When those restrictions are eased, and when City Hall reopens to the public, staff anticipate being able to host meetings in the Council Chamber that includes both in-person deputations and electronic deputations.

Staff will also continue to monitor the teleconference solutions available. Skype for Business was the best solution available in March, for the first electronic meetings that were held. Since that time, Microsoft Teams has evolved into a better solution, having added features that it did not have in March, while still providing features such as a dial-in number. Staff have transitioned the electronic meetings to the Microsoft Teams platform in an effort to provide the best possible experience for the public, Council and staff.

Financial Impact

Costs associated with implementing the teleconferencing technology to allow electronic participation has been accommodated within existing budgets.

Broader Regional Impacts/Considerations

Not applicable.

Conclusion

Staff recognize the importance of public participation in city decision-making and keeping this in mind identified a teleconferencing solution to allowed for public participation regardless of technological know-how or access to technology. Outreach activities, to inform the public and organized groups about the availability of electronic deputations, and how to make them, have been undertaken. Staff will continue to work towards providing the best possible virtual meeting experience for the public, Council and staff.

For more information, please contact: Todd Coles, City Clerk, x8281.

Attachments

1. Letter from Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, dated June 12, 2020
2. Corporate and Strategic Communications – Virtual Public Meeting Promotions

Prepared by

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