

Big G in Conversation: In Council Chamber: February 16, 2021

Transcript

Host: Wendy King

Stephen O'Brien, General Manager of City Clerk's Office

Dylan McMahon, Manager of Legislative services

Jennifer Slater, Manger of Information Privacy and Election

Wendy King 0:05

Welcome to Big G in Conversation, the podcast inside Guelph City Hall. I'm Wendy King, and on today's show, we're talking with the folks from the city clerk's office, all about city council projects procedures and policies. So let's move into city council chambers and get started.

Wendy King 0:27

Well it is great to be able to keep our conversations going with this podcast, as we talk about all things City Council. I'm Wendy King, your host and joining me today is general manager of the City Clerk's Office Stephen O'Brien, Dylan McMahon, manager of legislative services, and Jennifer Slater manager of information privacy and election. So thanks everybody for your time and welcome. So I guess, Stephen as an overview, very basic. What is it that the city clerk's office is responsible for?

Stephen O'Brien 1:01

Oh, you know I liken it back to sort of the role as a connector we we play a really important role, I think in connecting the community to to their local government, sort of, are things that are sort of steady and true for our work, our supporting counsel and that legislative processes of decision making that they make. We also, as some of the titles that you mentioned allude to, we have a mandate to support the city's Records Management Information Privacy processes, and every four years we support and deliver municipal elections. We also, not so much during COVID, but you can still come into City Hall during COVID and the folks you'll see at the ground floor are our Service Guelph team and so we also offer frontline customer service in that regard.

Wendy King 1:43

I always assume city, city council's offices where I went to get a lot of information but pay your bills, back in the day, not that people do that probably as much anymore.

Stephen O'Brien 1:54

There's still some of that happening but yeah.

Wendy King 1:56

Yeah. So, lots of big projects underway, I know, among them Council composition and Ward boundary review so if you could just remind us how many councillors now represent the city, and how many wards?

Stephen O'Brien 2:10

Yep, so 12 members of council plus the merit of 13 member council and total, and they're spread out over six wards so the mayor is elected at large, and each of those councillors share a ward with a council mate, so two councillors per Ward.

Wendy King 2:24

And are they full time or part time?

Stephen O'Brien 2:26

Right now right now technically part time. And that's sort of a bit though and it came out of some of the discussions that an engagement that the team did with members of council, really, it's not a hard and fast rule in terms of compensation remuneration part time, but certainly some members of council bring a full time level of work to the to the job.

Wendy King 2:46

Oh yeah, I'm sure they do. So I, this might be for Dylan but whoever. How long since you've done like a comprehensive review of all that?

Dylan McMahon 2:55

Everyone yeah so I don't know that in Guelph's history we've ever done a comprehensive review quite to the extent that we're doing it right now so there's been some tweaks to our boundaries over the years, there was a ward bound review back in the 1990s, but the composition of council so the idea of 12 Part time counselors, and the mayor that's been in place for many many many years without any sort of significant changes.

Wendy King 3:19

So, I know that Guelph has just grown, incredibly, and I guess the idea is to make sure that all regions are fairly represented so do you take into account how much the city will grow say in the next decade as well as how much it has grown.

Dylan McMahon 3:36

Yeah, for sure. So I think at the end of the day, it's all of the project on the composition side and the ward boundary side, is to make sure that residents of Guelph have fair and effective representation, that means now, but also as Guelph grows so we're gonna look at population trends over the next 10 years to make sure that any sort of revisions are going to ensure that that fair representation as the city grows from I think about 160,000 right now to about 191,000 and in 10 years.

Wendy King 4:04

Wow, that's, that's a big growth. That's amazing. So, I'm sure that you're looking for community engagement, you've probably already had some. Are you looking for feedback and in what way?

Dylan McMahon 4:18

Yeah, we're absolutely looking for feedback. So, the first phase of the project regarding Council composition is wrapped up. We're in the second phase now which is the ward round review, there's three rounds of engagement, we're going to be conducting for the review, we've done the first round, which was all about sort of informing and educating the public, getting an understanding of the principles that underpin or boundaries. And now, in the next couple of weeks, live on February 23 We'll have the second round of engagement for the ward boundary review and that's exciting because that's the first time that we're actually gonna be looking at revise more boundary maps so we're gonna have in the vicinity of 12 sort of different options for Ward boundaries for different sort of compositions composition

structures that members of the public will be able to look at and go over and give us feedback on.

Wendy King 5:04

So when you look at that the Ward it's obviously you talking about, you might have to extend some, some might get smaller I'm assuming a lot will get bigger. Just what kind of options do did the public have to look at?

Dylan McMahon 5:18

There's going to be a lot of a lot of different options there so when it comes to Ward boundaries, there's sort of different principles that underpin the way that they're designed. So, our consultant team is going to look at population parity so making sure that the number of residents in different wards is roughly equal right now, there's also an element of making sure that they're roughly equal in 10 years, that you know we don't make something that's really good today but but not so good in 10 years, but we also want to make sure that Ward boundaries respect, neighborhoods, the neighborhoods that people live in the communities of interest, we don't want to draw or boundaries that that sort of Tee or or cut neighborhoods in half so we're going to try and respect those. And then we also try and use physical geographic boundaries, whether it's roadways, railways, rivers and Guelph is pretty relevant, I think, and all of that comes together to sort of underpinned though, the actual way that those Ward boundaries would be drawn.

Wendy King 6:12

And when you say Council composition. What do you mean exactly?

Dylan McMahon 6:17

Yeah, So for council composition we're sort of talking about what what Stephen described earlier, so how many counselors do we have, are they full time or are they part time, and how are they elected so is it one elected per Ward two elected per Ward, perhaps even three councillors elected per ward. Obviously that's very closely tied to the number of wards that we have so they're sort of flip sides of the same coin.

Wendy King 6:40

Gotcha. Okay, so, and then also I know you said there's some more feedbacks and more public meetings, etc. Next steps then for the boundary review.

Dylan McMahon 6:51

So next step will be the second round of engagement that starts on February 23. We're going to have two town halls. One will be in the afternoon so I don't have the dates just handy right now but we'll have two town halls and be posted on on Guelph.ca During about a two to three week engagement period, and then we'll be coming back to the public again in April, with a reduced sort of set of options so we're we're going forward with all options right now we'll come back in April with two, three, maybe four sort of final options and the community will get to give us some input and some feedback on those options again.

Wendy King 7:25

And then when do you think it's all decided?

Dylan McMahon 7:28

We're looking to have Council make a decision in June so hopefully by the end of June. We'll be bringing forward reports to council with some recommendations and then we'll have a decision from them at that point.

Wendy King 7:39

Okay, so now, if the word configurations change, then obviously impacts. Excuse me voting methods so bringing Jennifer in for this and I guess we're talking 2022 For the next municipal election is?

Jennifer Slater 7:53

Yes, that's right Wendy.

Wendy King 7:54

Yeah, so I mean, this is a hot topic, I mean fair and accessible voting procedures as we've just all experienced with our American neighbors. So this is a biggie. So where do you guys stand do you do mail in options?

Jennifer Slater 8:09

Yeah, so right now we're coming to council next week on February 17. And we're recommending a vote by mail option as a remote option to make sure that live outside of the city if they're not able to get in and obviously very conscious of the current COVID-19 context but we want to have an option that would allow people to vote without having to come to the in person poll so.

Wendy King 8:32

So have you ever done mail in option or would this be the first time?

Jennifer Slater 8:37

This would be the first time we've offered vote by mail. But you know, looking at the context of provincial and federal offerings and higher levels of government and it has been offered by other municipalities, cities throughout COVID And we're comfortable we can develop processes and that would be a good option.

Wendy King 8:55

So yeah, what would you have to do in order to implement that obviously you have to make sure you got a pretty good system going.

Jennifer Slater 9:04

Absolutely, I think processes are something that's very important to make sure that processes and communication so that the public knows that they can request a mail kits, how to do that when they need to do that. And so we will obviously be developing those very early, and working with our vendors to make sure we can get those mail kits and what that person's would look like.

Wendy King 9:27

So I don't know if you have, if this has all been discussed already, but can you tell from your studies if the public is confident in that way of voting.

Jennifer Slater 9:39

So we did two public engagement at the end of last year on voting methods, and you know we often talked about three options we talked about Internet voting, we

talked about telephone voting and we talked about vote by mail. We saw a relatively high level of confidence, with each of the options but certainly there was a distinct public preference for Internet voting and that's something that we've noted and we'll be discussing with counsel on the 17th. It's, you know, we've had to go within and there's a number of factors we can talk about that go into decision making for webmasters recommend, but certainly appreciating the public does have an interesting internet.

Wendy King 10:18

So then you have to make sure everybody has a fair and accessible way of doing that right because not everybody's got the greatest internet etc.

Jennifer Slater 10:28

Exactly yeah and accessibility is certainly an important thing that we, we consider throughout the process. Looking at what next will be accessible. We always have a good touch points and conversations with our Accessibility Services staff, as well as the accessibility advisory committee to look at things, you know, everything from the remote voting option whatever that final Council decision is in person voting. We're also considering a potential vote perform pilot, so we'll be considering and discussing accessibility with with the folks who know that best.

Wendy King 11:03

How are you feeling about telephone voting?

Jennifer Slater 11:08

So telephone voting is something that we're not recommending, you know, in our report that's going on the 17th we do express some concerns with with Internet voting and we know that telephone voting, the actual base of that platform is all of the votes are sent and counted through the Internet voting system. So any concerns we expressed with them, with the Internet voting process or method. It also applies to telephone voting, you know, we also know that based on kind of surveying understanding who uses that method, it's not very commonly used by municipalities, our size that how we have about a little over 90,000 electors, so not commonly used at that size, and typically lower levels of use, which is something obviously we want to make sure that people will want to use an opportunity offer. And we do have some concerns with telephone voting around accessibility. So, whether Internet voting and different methods typically offer some form of customization that can, you know, a voter can stipulate how they would like to vote

or kind of adjust a voting experience to work best for them. It limits customization because it is an audio recording wouldn't be someone interacting with a person on the phone to vote. And, you know, certainly that limits the support that someone can receive if they would like to have someone assist them to vote or obviously if they speak English as a second or third language, there's challenges potentially accessing that voting method.

Stephen O'Brien 12:42

You know if I can jump in Wendy too. The way to look at it is if we have, you know, a litany of candidates on the ballot, you can imagine going through a boat phone voting process where all of those, you know, press one for this candidate press two for this candidate you can imagine how long that might be and so we're trying to make sure I mean, delivering an election is like any other service that the city delivers we're trying to make it accessible we're trying to make it intuitive we're trying to make it easy, you know, making voting easy is something that's important to us.

Wendy King 13:11

Yeah, You know, and it's it's such an education too because we're so, kind of, you know, trained, and it's Election Day is one day and we have this much time and we line up and, and whether it's even good to go back to that right I know this, you're not doing this just because of COVID But that's something you have to consider.

Stephen O'Brien 13:29

Absolutely. I think the COVID pandemic makes us think. I mean we were always thinking quite deliberately about remote voting methods to again make, you know, enhance the service that is election services but obviously congregating in large crowds, we hope that we're at a different spot in October of 2022 than we are now, even in January or February of 2021, but we need to be mindful of that we need to be ready for that.

Wendy King 13:54

What's your gut feeling do you think we'll go back to that or can you even guess at this point?

Stephen O'Brien 14:00

I think if I could guess I'd be wherever you're very rich man I don't know but I mean I think the reality is I think that people are going to take their time, I would imagine to to sort of get back from I think people are eager to sort of get back to quote unquote normal. But, you know, I also think that people are going to be hesitant about large congregations and we know it's of no fault of the election design or the system but we know that people tend to go to the polls later in the day right it's sort of a right today's election day oh I got to get out and vote right so people are going to want to avoid those sort of long lines and that kind of thing. And so, us having the opportunity to offer a remote method for those that aren't comfortable or people that might be immunocompromised maybe they've got a disabilities as, as, as Jen mentioned like we've got to give people the opportunity to vote in, in ways that support them, and make it easy for them.

Wendy King 14:49

Wendy King 14:49

And you're so right, making it easy right because then we used to, we didn't, we didn't use to have early voting. Now what's kind of we're expecting that now that you're going to have a week or so of early voting and now you're giving us all these options which, you know, we wouldn't even have thought before it was just always traditionally one day, you know, you know, eight to eight or whatever it was and there you and there's always, I worked in election one time and there's so many things that come up on the spot so I understand what you're saying about phone voting would kind of be just a real hassle.

Stephen O'Brien 15:24

Yeah

Wendy King 15:25

Yeah, for sure. So just to switch, switch gears a little bit. Do I understand that you're adding an Integrity Commissioner, and if so what is that person's role like probably that's for you, Steven.

Stephen O'Brien 15:37

Yeah, not necessarily adding we've had an Integrity Commissioner with the City of Guelph or council has appointed an Integrity Commissioner, I should say, since 2011. Which is around the time when that position was added as a quote unquote accountability officer, under the municipal municipal act so, but what what is different this time around is as of January 1 There's a new Integrity Commissioner for the city of Guelph and so on. At the end of last year, effective January one helpful appointed Mr. John Mascara and Eric Berlus LLP as the city's new Integrity Commissioner, and so really this is an accountability officer that's sort of formally required by every municipality, under that again that municipal act that I mentioned. And they play a unique role. Their role is to basically provide advice and guidance on and at times enforcement of council's code of conduct, they also support counsel by providing advice on municipal conflict of interest matters. And they also, you know, important for listeners as they have a public education role as well so, and they accomplish that through various means we require our integrity commission to have an annual report so that's a good way for the public to be aware of the actions and things that the integrity commission carried out over over the previous year, and actually the city's previous Integrity Commissioner was interviewed by another local podcaster, as part of as sort of part of fulfilling that public education mandate.

Wendy King 16:56

Very good. And I know there's lots of ways for the public to engage with council and with your office, but at council we always used to have delegations, which I'm sure you still do. But how do you do that in the COVID world?

Stephen O'Brien 17:11

Well actually I'm pretty proud of and kudos to Dylan and his team for this. I think we were one of the first if not the first to sort of go virtual with with council meetings and that was, you know if the pandemic I remember correctly, it was March 13 was Friday the 13th and the 16th was the Monday, I think the province passed legislation on the 17th or the 18th, allowing for remote council meetings and I think we had our meeting, you know, sometime on the 22nd or 23rd If I remember correctly. So yeah, we're now fully remote people can call in, they can delegate they can, they can listen in tune in, we broadcast live through Guelph.ca/live so it's still a very public process. It's just virtual and remote public process.

Wendy King 17:57

It's probably a lot handier for a lot of people actually.

Stephen O'Brien 18:00

Yeah I mean I think so I think I think, you know, it's not uncommon and Dylan had a meeting on Monday night that he was in the clerk's chair for and there was a significant amount of delegates, you know, previously, that means that those people would have had to come to City Hall and sit and wait for their turn to speak. Now they're still listening and sort of waiting but they can do that from the comfort of their home and I think about parents with young families or families with with older, older adults, as parents, they need to care for and so I think, I think it's added a level of accessibility for sure.

Wendy King 18:30

That's great. Well, great information everybody and maybe just a couple quick questions. Steven I'll give it to you, I guess, rapid fire engineer, and I know that's hard, but how did the initiatives that we've discussed affect your budget?

Stephen O'Brien 18:46

Well on the voting methods side that Jen spoke about that's covered that's in a reserve that the council contributes to every year. The composition of the council composition and ward boundary that might have an impact, so we'll have to wait and see what comes of that so it sort of depends, depends on which one we're talking about.

Wendy King 19:03

Right, and same same basic thing but how did the initiatives benefit your community?

Stephen O'Brien 19:09

I think it's all about sort of continual maturity continual growth as a community. You know it's important we have traffic master plans and parks master plans it's important for council to look and consider their governance structure periodically it's, it's, you know these things are foundational they underpin all the decisions that Council makes on things like transportation plans or or parks plants. This is really the plan for how Council is structured when I, when I think about Council composition or boundary. And the same thing holds true for the election services it's about growth and continually offering the best services we can.

Wendy King 19:44

And this is maybe tough but one word describing why the city wants to move forward on all of this.

Stephen O'Brien 19:51

I think I will come back to sort of the same thing I mentioned earlier, so if I had to pick one word it would sort of be maturity and growth, it's about continually evaluating what we do, growing as a community growing as a service provider that the city is, and making sure that that the government that supports the community and represents the community is reflective of the community.

Wendy King 20:10

Great. Well, I can see you guys have a lot of things on your plate I better let you get to it. My thanks to Steven, to Dylan, and to Jennifer for helping us understand more of what happens in the city clerk's office. Thank you all really appreciate your time and your expertise. I'm Wendy King for Big G in Conversation and let's keep the conversation going.

Upbeat music

Wendy King 20:33

I'm Wendy King with the city of Guelph's Big G in Conversation podcast. Thanks for joining me, if you have ideas for a show or comments, you can email, bigGpodcast@guelph.ca. Until next time, Take care, and let's keep the conversation going.

-End-