

The Composition of the Municipal Council – Electoral Options

This is the third in this series of articles. As we told you in August, your Council is looking for feedback on the composition of Council. Council is interested in community feedback on both the numbers of council members and the way the members are elected. August's article explained the differences between elections "at large" and elections by geographic ward. The article asked readers to respond to the following questions:

- (a) Is it important to you to have a "ward councillor", elected to represent your geographic township's interests? Or would you be comfortable having all council members elected "at large"?
- (b) If you are a fan of the "ward councillor" system, are you comfortable with the way the wards are drawn up? Or do you think the distribution of people per ward should be determined differently?

These questions remain relevant and you are encouraged to respond to them. In our September article, we asked for your feedback on the number of persons making up the Neebing municipal Council. It is currently comprised of seven members. Five seats is the smallest size of Council permitted under Ontario law, and the council size used by most small, rural municipalities in Ontario. Council continues to be interested in your feedback on how many members you think your council should have.

In this month's article, we are delving deeper into "ward" vs. "at large" elections, as discussed in August. Whether there are 5 or 7 members of Council, elections (for all members except the Mayor) can be done using a ward system, all members can be elected on an "at large" basis, or, as is the case today, a mixture of methods can be used, where some members are elected "at large" and others are elected by ward. It is mandatory that the Mayor position is elected at large.

Having a completely "at large" election is easier from an administrative standpoint to organize and run, as there is only one voters' list. Each resident has the same number of votes as there are seats at the council table. While some municipalities dislike such a method, because a majority of the seats could be filled from a single area in the municipality, creating an appearance of bias towards that section, the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act* would prevent a member from acting in his or her own financial best interests (over those of the public at large), and (now mandatory) Council Codes of Conduct could be used to "police" any ethical biases that may appear.

Another way to off-set this appearance of unfairness would be to assign a geographic area (not a "ward") to each member of the Council, regardless of where he or she lives, and the fact that he or she was elected "at large". The head of council may or may not be included in such an assignment exercise. Typically, the head of council is seen as representing "all" residents, so assigning an area would not be the "normal" thing to do, but it is up to the Council to structure its composition as it sees fit.

These geographic areas could be created however council saw fit. 4, 5 or 6 areas of land could be determined that would have roughly equal populations, for example.

The options (other than status quo) for mixing ward representation with at-large representation are as follows:

Number of members elected at large	Number of members elected by wards
Five members:	
2 + Mayor	2
1 + Mayor	3
Seven members:	
4+ Mayor	2
3+Mayor	3
2+Mayor	4

No option for “one ward” is included, since that equates to “at large”. The authority for Council to divide only “part” of its territory into wards is unclear, although it is arguable. This would be, for example, having one of the geographic townships as a stand-alone ward and all other geographic townships combined into an area represented by persons elected “at large”.

Ward boundaries would need to be adjusted in each of the above options. They can be adjusted independently of the geographic township boundaries or utilizing them. For example, if a decision was made to have 4 wards instead of 5, but it was easiest to use the 5 geographic township boundaries we now have, and if a decision was made where each of the four wards would be closer in population, a logical reconfiguration would be combining Pearson and Pardee, and leaving Blake, Scoble and Crooks “as is”.

As noted, the head of Council must be elected at large. Accordingly, with a 5 seat council, you would require 4 wards, or have 2 wards, each entitled to elect two members of the council. With a 7 seat Council, you could have 6, 3 or 2 wards.

In the past two municipal elections, 2014 and 2018, most of the seats at the council table were “acclaimed”. In 2014, all positions were acclaimed except the Blake Ward member’s seat (for which a ward election was held so that voters in the Blake Ward could choose between the two candidates). Neebing electorate living elsewhere than in Blake Ward did not vote for any municipal council candidates – but could only vote for School Board Trustees. In 2018, all positions were acclaimed except the head of Council (for which an at-large election was held so that all Neebing voters could choose between the two candidates).

If the elections are done by ward only, the residence location of the candidates may become more important to ward residents. If a rule is imposed requiring that ward candidates live in the ward they are running to represent, however, based on the past two elections, it may be challenging to find candidates for all wards.

The information in this article provides more detail to inform an answer to question (b) noted above.

Your feedback is important to the Council. Have your say on these very important issues.