

Memorandum

To: Mayor and Council
C: Municipal Clerk;
Chief Administrative Officer
From: Councillor Douglas W. Judson
Date: March 14, 2022
Re: **Removing Barriers to Participation on Council**

1. Overview

This memorandum is intended to frame a discussion on basic measures that can be adopted in advance of the 2022 municipal election in order to remove barriers to seeking municipal office or holding office once elected, with a goal of improving the diversity of candidates for Council and Council itself. I outline some further proposals which, it is hoped, can be considered more fully as part of the anticipated governance review.

Fort Frances is at a turning point – socially, economically, and demographically. Taking swift action – today – to ensure that our Council has more opportunities to reflect the community it represents is essential to improving citizen engagement and taxpayer satisfaction with the work of the municipality.

This memorandum proposes some straight-forward by-law amendments that could be enacted quickly to send a clear message to the community that municipal participation is open to citizens at all ages, all family types, and all identities.

While it is anticipated that some of this discussion will continue as part of the governance review in the year ahead, these initiatives are not mutually exclusive, nor do they operate at cross-purposes. Fort Frances cannot wait another election cycle before it starts to take seriously the need for systemic reforms and the removal of barriers at the Council table.

I have asked the Clerk to recommend that this request be referred to the Administration & Finance Executive Committee for consideration and to generate a recommendation to Council.

2. Profile of Our Community versus Our Council

During my remarks at the Committee of the Whole on February 14, 2022, I discussed the need to remove barriers to participation in Council. In my remarks, I highlighted the following demographic figures from Statistics Canada:

- While our community is evenly split between men and women, only 2 Council seats are held by women;
- While roughly three-quarters of our community is under the age of 60, 71% of Council is age 60 plus;

- 25% of our community is Indigenous, compared to 0% of our Council;
- People not in the workforce hold 86% of the seats on Council; and
- 34% of the households in our community have children in them, but none of the people around the Council table live in those homes.

It is obvious that there is a problem engaging younger people and working people to participate in Council. Speaking personally, the only reason I can participate is because I am self-employed and have broader control over my own schedule. Even with that control, it is an ongoing challenge to make time during the business day. It comes at significant cost.

In speaking with parents in younger families, youths, Indigenous citizens, and others in the community, some of their primary needs revolve around scheduling, technology, and time commitment. These are barriers to their participation and disincentivize them from running for office or from being able to encourage someone they know to run. The citizens I have spoken to also express some frustration that their perspective is not seriously considered nor understood by Council – both the current and most immediate terms of Council. There is a feeling that this reflects the lack of diversity around the table.

3. The Literature

These challenges are not unique to Fort Frances. The literature reflects a “diversity crisis” in municipal politics.¹ Most Councils – even in larger centres with more diverse populations – lack proportionate representation of racialized minorities, women, Indigenous people, those living in poverty, those under the age of 40, and members of the LGBTQ2 community.²

Fort Frances’ Council sits among a group of municipalities of a challenging size, where the time commitment is more serious than in smaller centres, but not enough to justify a full-time or even half-time salary. As a result, Councils – especially in smaller communities – have tended to attract a retired, self-employed, financially-stable demographic”.³ Incumbents are frequently re-elected, and renewal is slow.

At the same time, it is firmly established in the governance literature that more diverse decision-making bodies make better decisions. As one author put it, in the corporate board context:

There are several reasons that companies with more diverse boards perform better. One is that they often more accurately mirror customer and client bases. Having a diverse board can improve your understanding of purchasing and usage decisions, particularly as studies have found that women often drive 70-80% of purchasing decisions, and help you better understand your customers. Without women on your board, you are missing a valuable

¹ Kirk Winter, “The diversity crisis in municipal politics”, Lindsay Advocate (October 13, 2021), available at <https://lindsayadvocate.ca/the-diversity-crisis-in-municipal-politics/>.

² Erin Tolley, “Lack of council diversity puts municipalities at risk”, *Policy Options* (October 30, 2018), available at <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2018/lack-of-council-diversity-puts-municipalities-at-risk/>.

³ Winter, *supra*.

opportunity to bring in voices that represent this broad swath of potential and actual customers and clients.⁴

By analogy, a more demographically representative Council and governance structure in the municipality can be of assistance in ensuring municipal services, politics, and decisions are responsive to the perspective and needs of a wider array of citizens. It also helps Council stay connected to more pockets of the community, through the organic relationships that people at different ages and stages of life, different family types, and different identities maintain.

Some sources indicate that both social (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and age) and professional diversity are important for achieving these benefits.⁵ This is something Council itself has tried to recognize (with some continuing resistance), in requiring a skills-based succession plan for the board of the Fort Frances Power Corporation. While we do not have the same leverage with a politically elected “board”, we can set the stage for a broader cross-section of our community to see themselves at the Council table.

Finally, speaking with some members of staff, and from my own experience in other organizations, I am aware that some funders and granting organizations are now asking questions about the diversity and representativeness of the governing body of the applicant organization. In our case, that governing body is Council and its subordinate committees. While we cannot preordain the results of an election, we can set the stage for more robust and equitable participation.

4. Recommendation

In my discussions, the primary barriers to diversifying participation in our Council are as follows:

- The limited scope of electronic/remote participation in Council business;
- The scheduling of meeting during the business day; and
- The lack of lower time-commitment opportunities to “learn the ropes”.

Some of these may be more fully addressed through a broader governance review over the year ahead. But others can – and should – be prioritized, without prejudicing that process. Addressing these priority items in advance of nominations so that Council can send a clear message to the community that we want a wide range of candidates to run for office.

A. Priority Recommendations for Discussion

The reforms I propose to prioritize would require simple amendments to the Procedural By-Law (46/20) and/or the Boards and Committees By-Law (53/16), as applicable, which would have the following effect:

- Requiring that all regular and special meetings of Council or Committee of the Whole take place after 5:30 PM unless the meeting is for an emergency purpose;

⁴ Mary Goudie, “Success and Society: Why diverse boards make better decisions”, *OECD, The Forum Network* (March 7, 2018), available online at <https://www.oecd-forum.org/posts/31011-success-and-society-why-diverse-boards-make-better-decisions>.

⁵ Stephanie J. Creary et al, “When and Why Diversity Improves Your Board’s Performance”, *Harvard Business Review* (March 27, 2019), available at <https://hbr.org/2019/03/when-and-why-diversity-improves-your-boards-performance>.

- Codifying that following a municipal election, the initial meetings of executive committees shall be scheduled for 7:30 AM or 5:30 PM, with an initial item of business at the first meeting being to determine the regular meeting time of the committee, which shall require a unanimous resolution of the committee, failing which the committee shall continue to meet at the 7:30 AM or 5:30 PM time identified; and
- Requiring that electronic meeting participation be made permanent for all executive committee, Committee of the Whole, and Council meetings, and that, where permitted by law, electronic participants shall count towards quorum in the meeting.

B. Medium-Term Recommendations for Discussion

Medium-term reforms, which I would recommend be forwarded to any forthcoming governance review for consideration, would include the following proposals to reduce the time commitment required by elected members, broaden participation in the decision-making and policy-making role of Council, and facilitate mentorship among aspiring Council members and younger generations in the community:

- The executive committees should be consolidated in number from 5 to 3 committees, with an appropriate division of responsibilities. This will reduce the time commitment of members of Council (some members are now on 3 committees, and the head of Council attends all of them). A number of our committees have routinely been cancelled or have meetings that are very short. Consolidation will also reduce the administrative burden on staff, who are now tasked with tracking 5 agendas.
- Two community representatives should be appointed by Council to each executive committee as voting members. These members should be selected by Council at the start of the term, after a public call for applications. The objective of this should be explicitly stated in the by-law as being to improve the professional and social diversity of Council's decision-making process and to provide exposure to the work of Council to members of the community who are interested in pursuing elected leadership roles in the future. These representatives should be paid a small annual stipend or honorarium for their contributions, in order to facilitate participation by working-age people and those who are low-income.
- Alongside the above changes, in-camera matters should be limited to consideration at meetings of Council or Committee of the Whole, in order to address uncertainty about the entitlement of non-members of Council to participate in these discussions and to maintain confidentiality and efficiencies (i.e., because in-camera committee recommendations cannot be endorsed on the consent agenda).

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