

Council meetings to remain virtual until at least October

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Shelburne Town Council will continue to hold their council and committee meetings electronically until the end of the current term.

During their meeting on Monday (May 30), Shelburne Town Council received a report from clerk Jennifer Willoughby regarding a return to in-person meetings following a requested update from Councillor Walter Benotto.

Shelburne Town Council has been holding electronic meetings since early April 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main issue of returning to in-person meetings in Shelburne is the space is required to comply with provincial requirements and the Town's voluntary decision to continue mask wearing as well as social distancing.

In the report to council, Willoughby noted three options researched by staff for council to return to in-person meetings.

The first option looked into was a return to the council chambers located in Town Hall, but due to its size it was deemed 'insufficient' requiring an alternate location. Staff also looked into re-locating the council chambers to the main floor of Town Hall, into the space previously used by the Shelburne Police Service (SPS).

'It is not a suitable location as an alternate council chamber. It would require significant capital costs to expand the spaces. To create the space needed would likely require an addition on the ground floor into the parking lot,' reads the report.

The final option presented to council was to utilize the Grace Tipling Hall, which was also viewed as not ideal.

'As we move forward with revitalization of the Grace Tipling Hall the expectation that rental, performances and other uses will increase so scheduling permanent in-person council meetings would likely interfere with future theatre uses,' said Willoughby.

According to the report to council, attendance to meetings pre-pandemic was approx. four to 15 people while views noted through live streaming average around 119 views.

While the number of people watching council appears to have increased, Coun. Benotto raised concerns surrounding participation from the public with council.

'Every meeting I've come to the mayor says 'is there any questions from the public' and the answer is no. They may be watching us, but they are not participating with us,' said Benotto. 'It seems like we're not getting any real public participation in the sense of people asking and questioning us.'

Mayor Wade Mills, while agreeing that council is not seeing as many direct questions during their meetings, noted the different ways the public is engaging with council matters.

'My thought is, at least from my experience, is that I tend to be getting more questions on the street, in the grocery store, by email, and social media. One of the changes we made to our procedural bylaw this term was to allow for the council inquiry section at our meetings and for the newer members of council that wasn't something done in the past and for the most part it's been a productive addition,' said Mills. 'I don't disagree, we may not be getting as many direct questions, but I do think that people have found other ways to get the information and questions to us.'

Coun. Shane Hall shared a similar sentiment.

?The fact is when we were in person and not live streaming the amount of people that were participating were extremely low, and since we have gone to this method, I think the engagement level with the community is up. Those questions they're coming with are much more informed or they're asking more questions than I'd seen in the early portion of the term.?

A hybrid method, with both in-person and electronic attendance, has been considered for the next term of council.

During the 2022 budget process, \$8,500 was included for the provision of in-person meetings with a hybrid approach, but was removed ?based on the understanding that meetings would continue to be held virtually for the remaining term of council?.

It was recommended that the cost for in-person council meetings be included in the draft 2023 budget.