

Council planning for first in-person meeting since pandemic started]

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Shelburne Town Council will be returning to in-person meetings come the new year after more than two years online.

During their meeting on Monday (Dec. 12), Shelburne Town Council received a report from clerk Jennifer Willoughby regarding the options to return to in-person meetings.

Shelburne Town Council has been holding electronic council meetings since early April 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In May of this year, council chose to continue with the virtual format until the end of its term in October.

One of the main factors in returning to in-person meetings in Shelburne is finding a space that can accommodate council, town staff, and community members attending the meetings.

Similar to the report presented to council in May, Willoughby noted three options researched by staff for council to consider in returning 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 (400 sq ft) it was deemed 'insufficient' and 'non-functional' requiring an alternative location. Staff also looked into relocating the council chambers to the main floor of the Town Hall, into the space formerly occupied by the Shelburne Police Service (SPS).

It was determined within that previous report that space would require significant capital costs to expand the space and currently we have repurposed this space for staff offices," explained Willoughby.

The third option presented to council in the report was returning to in-person meetings at Grace Tipling Hall, which has 195 theatre seats available.

It can accommodate staff, it can accommodate council on the stage and it can accommodate members of the public," said Willoughby.

Willoughby noted that council meetings would require an alternative approach (virtual) should the Grace Tipling Hall be booked or under renovation.

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

Coun. Walter Benotto, raised concerns with the continuation of virtual meetings and community participation as he did in the May council meeting.

I agree that the former council chambers is basically useless there is no way you could accommodate," said Benotto. "Zoom meetings are the worst way as far as I'm concerned to communicate, it makes it difficult. I understand a lot of people watch the meetings, but don't necessarily participate in the meetings we never get questions during question period."

While returning to in-person meetings at Grace Tipling Hall, Shelburne staff are still researching future possibilities to include a hybrid approach. As part of the report, staff asked for \$2,500 to be included in the 2023 budget to allow for the hybrid approach.

Currently we can record and live stream those meetings with what we've got," said Willoughby. "This will allow us [to operate]

should additional material, audio or visual, be required to be purchased in order to provide that hybrid approach.?

Despite council meetings returning to in-person, committee and board meetings will continue to be held virtually and live-streamed online.

?The word that we want to emphasize is a barrier-free opportunity. The ability for many people to volunteer comes with some constraints and what we found is that with the electronic format those constraints are almost eliminated,? said CAO Denyse Morrissey.

Shelburne Town Council's first in-person council meeting will be held on Jan. 9 at the Grace Tipling Hall, located in Shelburne Town Hall.