

Shelburne Council meetings to continue online for rest of 2020

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Shelburne Town Council will continue to hold their council, board, and committee meetings electronically for the remainder of 2020.

Town Clerk Jennifer Willoughby presented a report to Council on Monday (Sept. 14), which recommended the continuation of electronic meetings for the rest of the year.

‘With the potential for a second wave of COVID-19 in October, staff are recommending a very cautious approach to returning to in-person council meetings,’ said Willoughby during the meeting.

Shelburne Town Council has been holding electronic meetings since early April, as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Council electronic meetings previously had only been allowed during a Declaration of Emergency, made by either the province or municipality. Electronic meetings have since been made a permanent allowance through Bill 197, or the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act 2020.

A second wave of COVID-19 has been labelled probable by Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, and was highlighted as the major reason for the recommendation to continue meetings virtually.

‘We’ve seen an increase in the number of positive cases over the last few weeks with just recently the announcement of several Quebec Cabinet Ministers and Mayors having to self-isolate after one of them tested positive for COVID-19,’ Willoughby noted.

Mayor Wade Mills, during the meeting, inquired if public health had offered any direction or recommendations for the local municipalities on the decision to remain virtual. Willoughby says that weekly meetings for updates have been held, but that they have not provided any guidance or direction.

Other councillors also brought up the possibility of in-person meetings that could be live streamed to the public.

Hybrid models that provide both in-person and electronic meetings are being researched by lower tier municipalities in Dufferin. In October of 2019, Shelburne purchased eScribe software, including a camera to provide streaming of in-person meetings, but this, Willoughby says, would come with additional costs of around \$50,000.

Willoughby, in the report, noted there has been an increase in public engagement since council meetings began being held electronically. According to the report, attendance in-person by public members at council meetings average approximately 8 to 18 people, while views through live streaming have averaged 119.

‘Public engagement while offering an electronic virtual process has significantly increased. By allowing residents and members of the public to view the live stream of the council meeting at their leisure, on their own time, as opposed to providing an in-person session, we’re getting more interest,’ said Willoughby.

Shelburne Town Council will continue throughout 2020 with the electronic meetings, with town staff researching other opportunities from 2021.