

Meeting goes in favour of change to 8 wards

By Tim Foran
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

It was a gathering of few but the message was one: more accountability.

Only about five residents turned out during Wednesday's snowstorm to a public meeting on proposed new municipal ward boundaries, but both rural and urban residents agreed on a new future for Milton politics featuring one councillor per ward.

"The time has come to break away from the past," said Gowlands Crescent resident Bob Harris. "Trying to keep two councillors per ward doesn't work, and it won't work for a town growing as fast as Milton."

Of three possible options for new municipal ward boundaries starting in 2010, Harris, along with the other residents who spoke, preferred the eight-ward option rather than the current four-ward, two-councillor system.

"The thing that I like about it is there's one councillor, so there's accountability," said Harris.

Two other options available for review — a revised four-ward system and a five-ward system — involve maintaining the two-councillor-per-ward system for the most part. None of the options envision reducing or increasing the current eight local and two regional councillors elected by Miltonians, as council didn't allow for that possibility when it began the process.

Accountability was one reason why rural Nassagaweya resident Gary Ellis also preferred the eight-ward option.

He said the current two-member ward system favours the incumbent councillor at election time.

Ellis did suggest some modifications to the eight-ward boundary option. He preferred two wards be made up of purely rural area, essentially made up of Milton west of Tremaine Road, south of Britannia Road and east of Fifth Line. A case could then be made to elect one of Milton's regional councillors from that area as well.

However, satisfying that request might involve ignoring one of Milton council's parameters for designing new ward boundaries — the principle of effective representation espoused by Canada's Supreme Court in the dubbed 'Carter' case.

Essentially, that decision suggests electoral boundaries should only vary in population by 25 per cent, said Dr. Robert Williams, a political scientist contracted by Milton council to design and recommend the new ward boundaries.

And two of the four "guiding principles" Williams used for reference involve looking at current and future population.

With the massive growth in Milton's urban area, rural residents made up only 13 per cent of the town's population in 2006, according to his report. That number would likely be even less today.

Ellis argued that another of council's guiding principles for Williams should take priority, that of maintaining communities of interest.

"I think community interest should trump the numbers," Ellis said. "In the case of rural, forgive a bit on the population."

If council elects to change the ward boundaries, it's likely rural residents will lose some representatives. Currently, half of Milton's local and regional councillors live in rural areas.

Ellis said he realizes the rural area could lose members but he believes a one-councillor ward system could ensure the quality of representation makes up for the loss of quantity.

Following Wednesday's public meeting and another one last night in Campbellville, Williams said he plans to use public comments to devise one final recommendation to Milton council. That will be the subject of a public meeting March 23 at council's administration and planning committee, according to Town staff.

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