

Elections Code content to take shape at polls

Content, approval of Elections Code to be decided with "two-in-one" ballot

By Paul Baswick

SIX NATIONS — Community members who vote to ratify the Six Nations Elections Code won't know precisely what they've agreed to until after their ballots are counted.

Voters will be asked to choose which amendments should be included in the final version of the 2001 code at the same time they are asked to accept the document as a whole, participants at a public meeting on the code heard at Six Nations Tourism Wednesday.

A ballot on ratifying the document, members and volunteers with the Community Elections Code Committee told the over 40 community members in attendance, would ask voters to accept or reject specific proposed amendments to the document. The proposed amendments, as presented at the meeting, include adopting a Grade 12 education equivalency requirement for band council candidates, reverting to a two-year term of office,

imposing a one-term break for councillors who have served two consecutive terms, granting a leave of absence for band administration employees who are elected to council, and requiring public input in the selection of Six Nations' Electoral Officer.

The ballot would also ask voters if they accept the ratified document as a whole, as well as other changes such as adopting a new numbering system and minor wording changes to sections of the current code, before votes on the specific amendments are tallied.

Although the balloting format would give the electorate the final say in what changes should be made to the code, it gives rise to the possibility that some voters will consent to a document containing none of the amendments they supported in the first portion of the ballot.

Someone, for example, who votes to ratify the document while marking support for only the education requirement, could end up endorsing a final document that includes all of the proposed amendments except for the education requirement.

"It's a complicated thing because this has never been done in this fashion before, and we're trying to iron out the bugs," says band councillor and Elections Code Committee volunteer Roger Jonathan.

Jonathan, as did other community members at Wednesday's meeting, says he would have preferred a ratification vote in which voters would mark either yes or no to a finalized package of proposed amendments. He adds, however, that community members involved in the code consultation process this year were adamant that they be the ones with the final say on the code's content.

"I wanted to go with a specific package to agree on, but the community said 'No — you've got no right to tell us what we want — we'll vote whether we want two year or three year (terms). I said 'okay,' but it's a lot easier to just put out one package that you read and either agree with or vote no on."

Because of the potential for confusion with the "two-in-one" ballot, Jonathan says it's important for community members to know that if they agree to ratify the code, they will be agreeing to a document that includes only the amendments that have received the majority of votes.

"The last question (on the ballot) is

structured in a way that you know that you're agreeing to whatever the majority votes for in all those questions. The essence of it is 'Do you agree with the majority of the changes that are made to this code?' That means even if you wanted something in there and it didn't go in, it's still got to be majority rules."

He adds ballots marked in support of specific amendments but not in favour of ratifying the code will not be counted.

"If nobody ticks the last question then whatever you tick above it doesn't matter, because you're not agreeing to the package, so that would be like a spoiled ballot."

While it was proposed at Wednesday's meeting that two separate votes be held on the Elections Code — one to determine which amendments should be included in a final package, and a subsequent vote on the ratification of that finalized document, Jonathan says there likely wouldn't be enough time to hold two votes before the upcoming election.

"The time restraints would make that hard."

He insists, however, that the process of amending the current Elections Code has not been "rushed," contrary to the belief he says is shared by a number of his colleagues on band council.

"I can't see where council or an individual can say 'you're rushing it,'" says Jonathan.

"I can't see where the rush is. You could have been involved (in the process of revising the code) as a community member 18 months ago if you wanted to. But now that it's coming up to a conclusion, people are saying 'I disagree' and 'you're rushing it.' That's just trying to throw up blockades. To me, that's all it is."

While conceding a two-in-one balloting procedure may not be perfect, Jonathan says it is the best way to balance the community's wishes of determining the Elections Code's content and voting on it before the next general election.

"It's going to be hard, I know," he says.

"Not everyone's going to agree with the process but it's as fair as I see we can do it."

A ratification vote could take place as early as Sept. 22 or as late as Oct. 13, band councillor and Elections Code Committee volunteer David General said Wednesday.

The final draft of the 2001 code, he added, will be available to the public "well in advance" of a vote on the document.

The draft presented at the Aug. 22 public meeting at Six Nations Tourism, he said, is still a work in progress.

The committee, General noted, is still in the process of ensuring any potential glitch, from a typo to a redundant phrase like "burnt out of their house due to fire," is flushed out of the 2001 code.

In addition to keeping community members abreast with a page-by-page reading of the current draft, the meeting allowed participants to voice concerns they had with proposed amendments, such as candidate education requirements, and to raise some new issues that hadn't been considered by the committee, such as advance polling for a ratification vote.

Committee Chair Barb Harris says the committee plans to hold at least one more public meeting before the Elections Code package is finalized and put to a vote.