

What does a councillor make? Depends where you live

'Councillors in Stouffville are paid too low. I don't even think we make minimum wage': Rob Hargrave

BY SIMON MARTIN
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You might think that councillor salaries in the Northern 6 (N6) municipalities of York Region would be somewhat similar. But it turns out what a councillor gets paid in Aurora has little impact on what a councillor gets paid in East Gwillimbury.

According to the latest information available on the various town websites, Newmarket leads the way with a councillor salary of \$48,655 per year, followed by East Gwillimbury at \$43,800, Whitchurch-Stouffville at \$34,322, Aurora at \$28,611, King at \$26,123 and Georgina at \$25,547.

The data leads to some interesting questions, such as why does an East Gwillimbury councillor make \$15,000 more than one in Aurora or close to \$20,000 more than one in Georgina?

It certainly couldn't be population, because Aurora has roughly 35,000 more people than East Gwillimbury and Georgina has close to 20,000 more people.

It also seems little to do with meeting schedules, as both Georgina and Aurora council meet every week, while East Gwillimbury council meets every other week.

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So why do councillors in a town with fewer people (taxpayers) and meetings get paid significantly more?

"We are probably on the high end and they are probably on the low end," East Gwillimbury Councillor James Young said.

When Councillor Marlene Johnston was first elected to East

Gwillimbury council in 1985, the salary was \$9,000. She said there are many reasons why the salary discrepancy could exist, including the workload that is expected. She added that East Gwillimbury only has four councillor positions, with other municipalities having six or eight to share the workload.

East Gwillimbury Councillor Tara Roy-DiClemente was more blunt in her assessment. She left a job in the private sector to join council in 2010. The low councillor salaries in neighbouring municipalities such as Bradford at \$17,800 had Roy-DiClemente shaking her head.

"How do you expect anyone to deliver high-calibre decision making when you are compensated them according to that level of remuneration?" she asked. "We are a board of directors that manages millions of dollars. You get what you pay for."

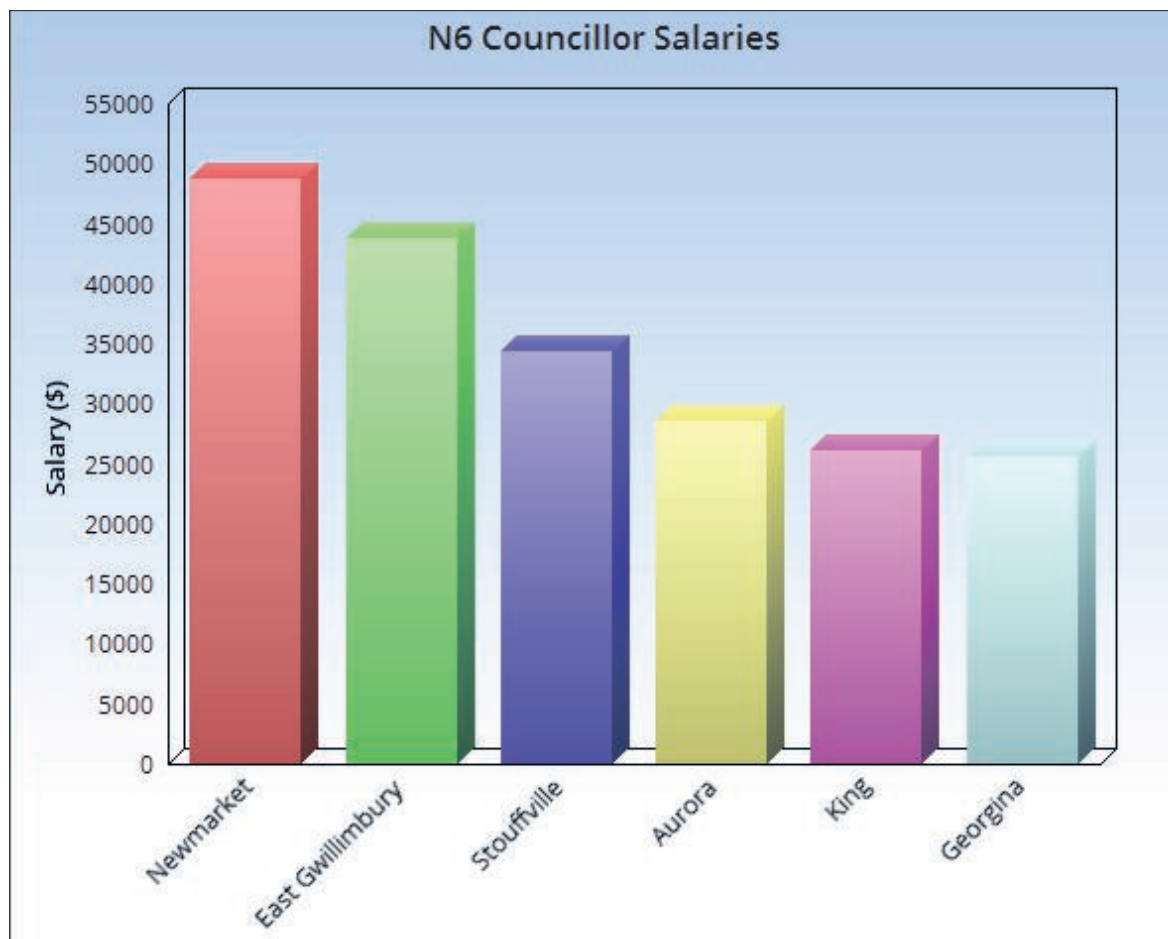
East Gwillimbury Mayor Virginia Hackson sees no problem with the current compensation levels. "We are the most significant growth community in the GTA right now. Our workload is much heavier than others. We will be the second largest in the N6 in less than 15 years," she said.

Councillors from municipalities who found themselves on the lower end of the salary spectrum weren't about to throw stones at their higher paid brethren.

"I'm not concerned about what other municipalities do," Aurora Councillor Michael Thompson said.

Aurora typically looks at council salaries before the next term of government and Thompson expects they will do so again before the 2018 election year. Without any guidelines in place it can be a difficult conversation to have.

Rob Hargrave knows all too well about the backlash that comes when council tries to increase salaries. The Ward 6 councillor in Whitchurch-Stouffville proposed in



2011 to increase the councillor salary 43 per cent to bring it par with East Gwillimbury.

The proposal sparked outrage and Hargrave and his council mates stepped back, approving an 18 per cent raise.

Hargrave has no regrets about the move. "Councillors in Stouffville are paid too low," he said. "When you add up the hours, I don't even think we make minimum wage."

Hargrave said he didn't get into politics for the money, but the salary probably keeps good people from even considering the job. "You want the best people sitting on the dais," Hargrave said. "The average house price is \$700,000 and the take home pay of a councillor is

\$20,000. It doesn't make sense."

Hargrave isn't the only councillor who feels they are not properly compensated for their work.

King' Councillor Avia Eek, also believes she is underpaid for the work she is doing. "I fail to see how our job can still be considered part-time," she said. While she didn't get into politics for money, the job is time consuming, she said.

Danny Wheeler and the Georgina council just gave themselves a 13 per cent raise. But it's hard to criticize, as they went from being the lowest paid councillors in York Region at \$22,552 a year to the lowest paid at \$25,547.

Wheeler pointed out that one-third of the councillor income in Georgina is tax free, which is also

the case in Aurora. But that factor fails to make up even half the salary difference between East Gwillimbury and its northern neighbour.

When York University political science professor Robert MacDermid learned the councillor salaries of northern York Region, one thing caught his attention: "They are appallingly low. You get what you pay for," he said. "I think most voters have no clue what politicians are getting paid."

The wage gap in council chambers is easy to see. The \$200,000 chief administrative officer is supposed to answer to the \$25,000 councillor, but the salaries seem to suggest the opposite happens, MacDermid said. "It's small part of devaluing democracy," he said.

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