

Dear Mayor Hoogenboom and Councillors:

Below is a letter I have sent to the Editor of the Review Mirror. I hope you will take my concerns into consideration.

Yours truly,

Jane Willms

Proxy Voting Undermines Democracy

Dear Editor,

I am writing to express concern about the Township of Rideau Lakes Council's Oct 23rd decision to allow for proxy voting at Council meetings. When Councillor Paula Banks and Councillor Jeff Banks argued for proxy voting so they could ensure their positions are represented when they cannot attend meetings, Council asked the Clerk to provide information on proxy voting. The Clerk's excellent report, provided to Council on Oct 23rd, outlines the following important problems with proxy voting (<https://pub-rideaulakes.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=3295>):

"Municipal Councils are mandated to conduct business in a manner that is open and accessible to the public. The open meeting provisions set out in The Act are founded on the principle that members of the public are entitled to witness local decision-making in a way that is accessible, accountable and transparent and that decisions are made with integrity. Of paramount importance in the decision-making process is the opportunity for decision makers to explore new ideas through debate, the exchange of ideas through questions and responses, and also includes the potential for amendments to a recommendation to be heard and considered by all voting members. One important consideration for proxy voting is that any member not in attendance will not have the benefit of any new information introduced at the meeting which may have influenced their position on any one topic, including but not limited to staff elaboration on reports, response to questions and any amendments to recommendations that may result. The proxy holder would not have direction on the new information and would need to exercise their discretion without any voting instructions provided by the absent member."

In other words, proxy voting undermines democratic governance. The Ontario government decided to introduce provisions for electronic participation in meetings and proxy voting in July 2020 as part of its efforts to help Municipalities cope with challenges presented by COVID-19. As the Clerk noted: "Out of the 444 Municipalities in the Province of Ontario, only two have exercised their capacity to utilize proxy voting," and neither of these has actually implemented the procedure.

On the basis of her report, the Clerk recommended to Council that proxy voting NOT be implemented at this time. Councillors Maxwell, Delaney and Pollard questioned the need for proxy voting, given that councillors have the option of attending meetings virtually. Mayor Hoogenboom noted that if and when a Councillor cannot even attend virtually, he has been willing in the past, and will continue to be willing in future, to defer important decisions until everyone can be present. (<https://pub-rideaulakes.escribemeetings.com/Players/ISIStandAlonePlayer.aspx?Id=c515d143-7127-4f9e-a717-9b1fe4ab45cc>– 40:45 – 1:07:30)

In spite of all this, Councillors P. Banks, J. Banks, Dunfield, Carr and Hutchings all voted to implement proxy voting, so the resolution passed in a vote of 5 to 4. These five Councillors did not address the above concerns about proxy voting and did not take the carefully considered advice of staff. They just insisted that there would be times when they could not attend even virtually and wanted the option of appointing a proxy. Councillor Carr said proxy voting is allowed provincially and federally; I have found no evidence that this is true. Two of these councillors said they are comfortable appointing a proxy because they take their positions prior to attending meetings, based on what taxpayers want (as though this is knowable for every decision), and so would not be influenced by debate or information brought forward at the Council table anyway! This would suggest that proxy voting could contravene the Code of Conduct for Councillors, which states: "Members of Council shall uphold a high standard of ethical behavior to ensure that their decision making is impartial, transparent and free from undue influence" (Schedule 'B' to By-Law 2019-17, section 5.3). It's hard to say that a proxy vote is impartial when it has not taken new information or debate into account.

There is a pattern here with these 5 councillors. They ask the staff to do a lot of work, researching and preparing a report, then disregard staff's well considered, professional advice. Is it any wonder that we have lost 3 senior staff in the last 4 months?

There seems to be a lack of understanding of the fundamental role of a democratically elected representative: gather and analyze all the data you can (mostly from professional staff), debate the issues with your fellow representatives, and then make the wisest decisions you can. The goal is NOT to attempt to second-guess what taxpayers want, because taxpayers will always disagree among themselves. And taxpayers do not have the time or access to analyze all the data; they are busy at their own full-time jobs. We hope to elect open-minded representatives who will listen to different views and do the hard work necessary to make intelligent, well-informed decisions. I believe proxy voting undermines this process. It's only useful when people are unwilling to change their minds.

Jane Willms