

New Tecumseth opts in on retail cannabis sales

By Kira Wronska Dorward

In the inaugural meeting of 2019, Council carried the motion to allow retail cannabis stores in New Tecumseth.

It was a lively debate, with various Councillors arguing for and against the motion.

Deputy Mayor Richard Norcross began the discussion by acknowledging the "overwhelming response by the community" to the survey Council has conducted online, which posed a series of five questions to residents, with over 1,000 respondents.

The report states, "To be eligible to open a retail store and sell recreational cannabis, you must have a Retail Operator Licence. On December 13, 2018, the Government of Ontario announced that a temporary cap of 25 Retail Store Authorizations will be imposed while cannabis supply stabilizes. The Government of Ontario remains committed to permitting the operating of cannabis retail stores in Ontario on April 1, 2019."

The majority of those polled were between the ages of 30 - 44, with nearly 58% of all respondents voting strongly in favour of allowing retail cannabis locations in the community.

A further 65% believed Council should "opt in" immediately, with another 54% indicating that they would prefer to obtain their cannabis through licensed retail locations.

Many respondents were concerned with the proximity of these stores to schools, playgrounds parks, and daycares, while simultaneously indicating they were not at all concerned with proximity to residential, industrial areas, or liquor stores.

Councillor Paul Foster expressed concern about the accuracy of the survey, stating it was "non-scientific" and that it was possible that respondents may have voted more than once and may also have lied about their age.

"That 100% of people support this is a wild assumption," he concluded.

OPP Detachment

Commander Inspector Steve Clegg was asked to approach the speaker's podium and speak towards the opinion of the police on the matter, but he stated that the

OPP would abide by Council's decision.

When asked about the weight of responsibility for policing and maintaining the Alcohol and Gaming Commission's policies and how it might impact the policing contract, Clegg stated that like alcohol regulation, certain officers would be assigned to conduct inspections at licensed establishments, and it would otherwise have no impact on police.

Councillor Shira Harrison Macintyre raised the question that if Council chose to opt out, would the black market thrive? Clegg responded that there is already an existing black market, but opting in would provide a legitimate supply.

The quality product being sold in storefront operations would be free of nonsense ingredients and a safer alternative, he stated definitively. Otherwise, the OPP could not say what impact opting in might have on black market distribution.

The issue surrounding smoking cannabis in public places was raised, to Clegg said that by laws can be changed and enacted to address that particular problem.

The minimum distance (150 m) between school zones and retail locations was also brought to attention, with Councillors citing the example of the City of Barrie which changed this bylaw to 300 m while choosing to opt in.

The Detachment Commander added that the AGC still has to approve the location of the 25 successful applicants for cannabis distribution licenses.

Mayor Rick Milne raised the fundamental question facing Council that evening on this decision, stating, "If we opt out, we can opt back in. But if we opt in we can't opt out."

Councillor Beattie responded by saying, "This is not 1919. It's 2019. This is a legal product that can be purchased and consumed. I think it's incumbent on us to be inclusive- if we opt out, we're out of the game. Let's not cut off our nose to spite our faces."

Council Fran Sainsbury, who it must be said was the most vehement opponent of passing the motion, countered with, "I don't like the term 'recreational marijuana'. To me, recreation is playing soccer in the park. I have a real concern that we're catering to a small group of people. I'm worried about the health aspect of this?if we're going to do this, we're going to do it with the staff we have. I don't want this to turn into hiring a completely new department."

Other Councillors responded that, "for Council to rip this survey to shreds is not productive," and pushed back on "fear-mongering."

Some Councillors believed that the popularity of marijuana was indicated by the number of

people, 17, 000, who applied for the 25 initial permits.

?People are still going it. ?Opting in or out is not going to change where people are currently using it.?

Concerns were also raised that opting out at this moment might affect any additional funding from the provincial and federal governments, as well as increased revenue for the Town.

Councillor Michael Beattie asked that Council opt out for now, and that the issue be revisited when the town had reached the required threshold, a population of 50, 000, to issue a further 25 permits for retail establishments.

The Mayor responded that it was a fluid situation.

The Deputy Mayor then asked that the motion to opt in be put on the floor, saying he had carefully considered both sides of the argument, but ultimately been persuaded by the ?overwhelming response? he cited earlier to vote in favour of the motion.

Other Councillors, in a last-ditch effort to stall on the issue, cited the Mayor's earlier comment about not being able to opt out once in, and that Council should table discussion until all aspects of the issue can be investigated, and Council can evaluate the long-term repercussions of areas that decided to opt in.

The Deputy Mayor then called for a recorded vote, with ultimately seven Councillors in favour and four opposed, and the rest abstaining.