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## NEWS LOCAL

### Council approves, in principle, moving to a 10-member, five-ward system starting with the next municipal council



By Jeffrey Ougler, Sault Star  
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SAULT STE. MARIE - And then there were 10.

While a common theme appeared to echo around council chambers Monday evening that the "system is not broken," council opted to slice by two, the number of elected representatives who will eventually serve Sault Ste. Marie at the Civic Centre.

Following a lengthy debate, council voted 7-6, with Mayor Christian Provenzano breaking the tie, to approve, in principle, moving to a 10-member, five-ward system starting with the next municipal council to be elected in 2018. The recommendation came from a committee charged last June with examining the municipal government's composition and geographic ward system.

The move also means city staff will need to realign Sault Ste. Marie from its current six-ward system to five. Two ward councillors will still be elected by voters in the ward and the mayor will be elected at large.

It's "very clear and evident" Sault Ste. Marie has more councillors, per capita, than the "vast majority" of other Northern Ontario communities which have varying municipal government models, said Provenzano, who penned the report.

"I'm not concerned that the quality of our government will decrease with a move from 12 councillors to 10," he said. "I don't think we jeopardize that. It's the right thing to do and it's a reasonable resolution to an issue that, I think, the committee, canvassed very thoroughly and respectfully."

The committee did a "significant" amount of public outreach and research.

"I think it's a natural and respectable and responsible conclusion," especially when city staff is "continuously" being asked to tighten belts, Provenzano said.

"I think it's a good way for us to lead by example."

Councillors voting in favour of the resolution were Paul Christian (Ward 1), Susan Myers (Ward 2), Sandra Hollingsworth (Ward 2), Matthew Shoemaker (Ward 3), Rick Niro (Ward 4) and Frank Fata (Ward 5). Voting against were Steve Butland (Ward 1), Judy Huppenen (Ward 3), Lou Turco (Ward 4), Marchy Bruni (Ward 5) and Joe Krmpotich (Ward 6).

Coun. Ross Romano (Ward 6) "abstained," but was told by city clerk Malcolm White an abstention is not allowed under the Municipal Act, and, therefore, Romano would be listed as opposed.

"Nonetheless, I will specifically state I'm abstaining of the vote," said Romano.

Committee members raised concerns that only one councillor would leave large geographic areas unrepresented should a member be ill travelling and issues arise. It was also suggested fewer councillors would require more committee work for each, quorum at meeting would be significantly reduced and extra staff resources might be needed, thus adding increased costs to the city.

Romano, extremely critical of the motion, contended the change will see councillors' workloads increase in terms of having to sit on at least one extra committee and field at least "15 per cent" more phone calls from constituents.

The move is slated to create some \$60,000 in savings via two fewer honorariums. Sault Ste. Marie city councillors currently receive an annual honorarium of \$22,738. The mayor receives \$70,756 annually.

Romano suggested that if council wants to trim costs, keep current council workloads intact, but prune honorariums by six per cent.

"I don't think (the terms of the motion) are creating efficiencies," he said, adding he would have liked to have had more information regarding how ward boundaries will be shifted.

Myers, who sat on the committee, said she was not, initially, in favour of any reduction to the number of councillors.

"I'm 63 years of age and I hate change," she said with a laugh, but added she was "very open" to hearing the committee's findings. She said the prescribed reduction of councillors won't make much difference, adding "technology of today" affords residents greater direct access to city department and cuts down on complaints to councillors.

Council service must be attractive to younger residents and, certainly, not merely to retirees, Myers said.

"I don't think that this is reflective of our community," she added.

Butland said the matter was "no momentous decision."

"I don't think this system is broken ... 12 (councillors) is fine," said Butland, but also added two fewer is not "earth shattering."

The report found North Bay has a unique council composition that includes 10 councillors and a mayor, all elected at large. Sudbury's ward system has one councillor elected per ward but has 12 wards due to an earlier amalgamation. Timmins residents elected their municipal government with a one-councillor ward system except for one ward, which is represented by four councillors as a result of an amalgamation with South Porcupine.

Christian said making the recommended reductions is the "responsible thing," and trimming the number of councillors to 10 is "not a big deal."

But Bruni said passing the motion would, indeed, be irresponsible, as the current council did not run on this issue. He suggested a 2018 referendum.

"Are we changing for the sake of change?" he said. "That is not a good reason."

The existing system has been in place since 1965 when the townships of Korah and Tarentorus were amalgamated with the City of Sault Ste. Marie. The last review of council's composition was in 2002.

Bruni said far too many questions remain unanswered.

"We don't know what the wards will look like," he added.

City staff must now make adjustments to ward boundaries, which will also need to be approved by council. It was earlier reported that any changes to the boundary or council composition would have to meet a 2018 legislative deadline.

Shoemaker, a committee member who compiled report data, wanted deeper cuts: eight councillors in four wards.

"That is a number that is right," he said, but added he believed few others on council had an "appetite" for such a reduction.

He dubbed council's action Monday evening as "not a major decision," as governments adjust "numbers all the time."

"I believe this is a reasonable step," he said, echoing Myers's argument that technology has trimmed councillors' workloads. "I'm willing to compromise."

Krmopotich described Ward 6 as a "lot of ground to cover."

"I don't think the system is broken," he said.

Hollingsworth said it's prudent for councillors to "look at our roles."

"It doesn't hurt to do a stop and reflect," she said, echoing those councillors who pointed to technology's role in changing workloads.

Niro agreed the "system is not broken," but said Sault council "sticks out like a sore thumb" when compared to council compositions of other Northern municipalities.

Fata said he was concerned about the "quality" of council candidates.

Although supporting the motion, he said the two-councillor reduction will have an impact as there will always be a few who declare conflict of interest "on usually very important issues," which could bring the number of voting members down to seven.

"You have, in the past, councillors who tend to (decide) the way the public likes to hear the answers," Fata said.

"They don't vote necessarily logically, as I like to use it, 'As the wind blows.'"

That, he said, would leave five members to "really, rationally and sensibly, make a very tough decision, in some cases."

However, Fata said he's on record saying he's in favour of 10 councillors.

"So I have to vote in favour of this," he added. "But, I certainly want to say there are some good arguments on both sides. Ten seems to be a safe number."

Huppenen agreed with those who said council needs younger voices and said she was pleased the committee didn't trumpet money as a prime motivator for reducing the number of councillors.

But she said it now means two less voices to serve constituents.

"I want to make sure that they're all looked after," she said. "If it isn't broke, why fix it?"

Turco said taxpayers ought to have input.

"I think we're doing a poor service to decide our fate here tonight," he added. "I think we should let the people decide. That's why we were elected."

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