

SAULT STE. MARIE THE SAULT STAR

Councillors votes down receiving extra stipends for board work

A report to council suggested the city's remuneration bylaw should be amended and updated, ultimately allowing members of council who sit on various local boards to accept the same remuneration as their colleagues around those tables.

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City of Sault Ste. Marie council chambers at the Civic Centre

City council is split on whether councillors should receive the same remuneration as their colleagues on various local boards.

The five-five vote, with Ward 5 Coun. Matthew Scott absent from the meeting, means the staff recommendation to amend the bylaw and allow councillors to accept any remuneration, fails.

A report to council suggested the city's remuneration bylaw should be amended and updated, ultimately allowing members of council who sit on various local boards to accept the same remuneration as their colleagues around those tables.

It's something that other Northern Ontario municipalities permit in their communities, even though councillors receive an honorarium, the report by city clerk Rachel Tyczinski states.

In fact, members of council in Greater Sudbury, North Bay, Timmins and Thunder Bay all receive honoraria from external boards where there is an honorarium provided to board members, her report said.

Those boards include the police services board, the public utility commission and the district social services administration board, among others.

Remuneration is also set for community members appointed to the committee of adjustment, committee of revision and property standards appeal committee and the fence viewers committee.

But some city councillors argued that members of council already receive an honorarium for their service and additional burden shouldn't be put on taxpayers.

Ward 4 Coun. Rick Niro said council has frozen its honorarium a few years ago. It also reduced the number of councillors elected, all moves designed to be cost effective.

He said paying councillors for their service on boards goes against that school of thought.

His wardmate Marchy Bruni agreed, and added he believes that councillors will start choosing to sit on particular boards that provide an additional payment, not because they have a particular interest in that board.

"We already receive an honorarium and mileage and we should sit on those boards because we want to, not because of the money," he said.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said the current works well and doesn't need to be changed.

He too believes that by offering additional remuneration to council will encourage councillors to choose board with those higher remuneration, not because they have a special skill set or interest on a board.

But Ward 2 Coun. Luke Dufour countered that the same argument holds true for those members who may choose easier or less onerous boards if compensation for time and skills are not offered.

For instance, he argued, the Public Utilities Commission board has thought outside the box and that has resulted in good dividends being paid back to the city.

The District Social Services Administration Board is also time consuming and onerous and Dufour – chair of that board – noted some council members chose not to attend that board’s important budget meeting which affected the levy.

“Councillors had an opportunity to make investments that would drive down the levy of taxpayers,” but some chose not to attend, he said, without pointing to specific individuals.

He argued councillors who put in the time and effort should be compensated for their service.

Ward 2’s Lisa Vezeau-Allen agreed, and said she too supports the motion and sees it as a tool that may result in getting younger community members involved.

The remuneration may help with costs like babysitters or day care and creates an equality around the table.

“Sometimes there are long time commitments required and this helps defray costs and time away from family,” she said.

Niro questioned whether the entire honorarium system should be looked at, and if so, that’s a task for the next council.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said he believes council’s honorarium should be called a salary because it is now fully taxed.

As a member of the PUC board and police services board for seven years, Provenzano said he didn’t get paid for his attendance and participation while others around the table did.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he said. “We’re doing the same work but we are treated differently because of an antiquated bylaw.”

Provenzano believes that time and contribution on a board is valuable and all members should be compensated equally.

“This really has an inconsequential effect on the levy,” he said, supporting the motion.

Those in favor of changing the bylaw to allow members of council to be compensated included Provenzano, Dufour, Vezeau-Allen, Donna Hilsinger and Corey Gardi.

Those opposed included Paul Christian, Sandra Hollingsworth, Shoemaker, Niro and Bruni. Matthew Scott was absent from the meeting.