

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE – APRIL 20, 2009

TASK FORCE ON DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION & RENEWAL: THIRD INTERIM REPORT

Recommendation

Councillor Tony Carella and Steven Del Duca, Co-chairs, Task Force on Democratic Participation & Renewal, recommend that the following report be received for information:

Economic Impact

Nil

Communications Plan

Upon receipt of this report by Council, Corporate Communications will issue a media release citing highlights of the Task Force's findings to date, as noted in this report.

Purpose

To keep Council informed of the work of the Task Force to date, according to a reporting schedule that stipulates the Task Force will provide such reports as of March 31, 2008, September 30, 2008, March 31, 2009, and September 30, 2009 (final report date)

Background – Analysis and Options

The Task Force was appointed in 2007, with a mandate to make recommendations for increasing voter turnout from 38% to 50% across the City of Vaughan in the next municipal election (November 2010). Over the past two years, the Task Force has examined the challenges and opportunities for the City of Vaughan to reach this goal by focusing on three key areas; 1) why people do not vote, 2) ways to increase voting, and 3) communication and promotion strategies to raise awareness and encourage citizens to vote.

To that end, three subcommittees of the Task Force met to discuss and collect research in each of these areas, to help further the discussion and identify suggestions for inclusion in the Task Force's final report to Council. Some of the issues addressed by the Task Force have included: patterns of voter participation in other municipalities and jurisdictions, both domestically and internationally, investigating the factors that result in lower voter turnout, and discussing remedial strategies.

Activities undertaken since the last interim report

Between October 2008 and March 2009, members of the Task Force on Democratic Participation and Renewal have met monthly to advance the initial research presented in the first and second reports detailing activities, respectively, to March 31, 2008 and to September 30, 2008. The second interim report encompassed information collected and analyzed by our research sub-committee, and helped guide the other two subcommittees as they worked over the last six months.

The Task Force recognizes that many of the challenges surrounding citizen engagement in the political process are not unique to the City of Vaughan, and thus have been working to draft a series of recommendations that will help create awareness of what the municipal level of government does for residents, create a more informed and engaged

voter, and increase access to voting options, in the hope that any or all of these items may influence a non-voter into casting a ballot in November 2010.

In the Task Force's initial report, it was noted that attempts would be made to have the then unidentified new City Clerk attend a Task Force meeting to discuss initiatives for enhancing voter participation in advance of Vaughan's 2010 municipal election, as well as some techniques used in other jurisdictions. Indeed, the City Clerk, Jeffrey Abrams, has attended a number of Task Force meetings, at which he provided a sense of the direction that the Clerk's office was planning to take for the 2010 election. In turn, the Task Force provided the Clerk with some insight into the conceptual basis for the recommendations that the Task Force is generating. These sessions have proven useful for the Task Force as it has provided additional perspective on the timelines that the Mr. Abrams and his team are employing for the proper administration of the next Vaughan municipal election.

Over the course of the past six months, the Task Force has continued to examine a number of items that were initially outlined in the research component of its earlier reports. They include:

- Alternative voting methods
- Increased access to election information
- Voting tendencies, including reasons why individuals don't vote in municipal elections
- Convenience of voting in Vaughan

To these ends, the Task Force agreed to formulate a survey that would be linked to the City of Vaughan website, and promoted via the City Page in the community newspapers, as well as by Task Force members to their electronic mail contacts.

City of Vaughan Survey

The survey, which was active in February and March 2009, was promoted on the City website, the City Page and in news stories in local media. When the survey was closed, a total of 658 responses were collected from Vaughan residents, a number that exceeded the Task Force's goal of contacting 500 individuals by more than 30%. The data collected from the survey will be used to help finalize the Task Force's recommendations to Council, and it provides validation of several suggestions raised in the Task Force's last report. Below are some statistics and results compiled from the community survey.

Background on the survey respondents

- 89.4 percent of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 64 years of age, with nearly 14% being under the age of 35.
- Vaughan residents who have been living in the City less than ten years represented the greatest number of respondents (38.5%)
- The survey was balanced in respondents from the core areas of the City. Woodbridge and Thornhill/Concord each accounted for 37.5% of the survey respondents.
- Nearly a quarter of all respondents did not vote in the 2006 municipal election.

General feedback from respondents

- Over 20 percent said that they felt they didn't know who the candidates were, and didn't understand the issues. Similarly, 15 percent said they didn't have time to vote.

- When asked about the importance of various types of communications, newspaper coverage and personal contact/all-candidate debates ranked the highest. A total of 85.7% respondents found newspaper coverage to be important or critical. Comparatively 79% of respondents felt candidate literature was/is important or critical. Signage was deemed to be not very important by 58.1%, while city advertisements were not important to 48.2% of respondents.
- In a sign that online technology is increasingly important, 57.4% felt that candidate websites were important to them.
- In feedback received from the survey, there were a decisive number of comments noting the need for greater access to candidates and debates.

Potential changes to Vaughan's election process

- When asked about possible adjustments to the election process in Vaughan, respondents' views were congruent with many of the suggestions being considered by the Task Force. They include:
 - The Task Force asked respondents whether expanding the number of advanced polling days would encourage them to vote. Over 55% of respondents said that it may encourage them to vote.
 - Comparatively, another idea was to expand the number of polling stations. Respondents expressed mixed feelings, as 45.9% said it would encourage them to vote, while 42.4% said it wouldn't.
 - Many residents in Vaughan work outside of the City making voting during traditional hours more challenging. The Task Force asked whether extending voting hours into the early morning rush hour, and/or later into the evening would cause them to vote. Nearly 64% of respondents said it would encourage them.
 - However, the most popular suggestion proposed by the Task Force was internet voting. Over 70% of all respondents said that it would encourage them to vote. This supports the Task Force's initial belief that internet voting would be well received by residents, and provides an added layer of access to the election process in Vaughan.

Access to candidate information

- One of the ideas referenced in the Task Force's earlier report to Council was requiring all candidates to provide a biography as part of their registration with the City Clerk. This would provide a non-partisan way to learn more about the candidates contending for Council seats.
- The question was posed to survey respondents and over 80% of all respondents said they were either likely or very likely to use this information before casting a ballot.

Reasons why residents didn't vote in 2006

- Of the respondents who did not vote in the 2006 municipal election, there were several common themes that emerged for their not casting a ballot. They include:
 - Lack of knowledge about local candidates – many residents said they didn't have basic information about candidates to make an informed choice.
 - A loss of interest due to the negative aspect of the 2006 campaign.
 - Discontent with the candidate options during the last election.
 - Ineligibility – several respondents mentioned they were either under the age

of majority, or had yet to receive Canadian citizenship, and as a result were legally prohibited from casting a ballot.

- A lack of personal contact with candidates – throughout the survey, residents made it clear they weren't canvassed by candidates in any form.

Other comments provided by respondents

The Task Force allowed respondents to give some additional comments, and a number of respondents took the time to share their thoughts. They include:

- A vital need to introduce internet voting to reach eligible voters, and attract a younger demographic as well.
- Revisiting the campaign financing process, related to tax rebates on donations.
- Additional public forums during the campaign cycle, including having some as webcasts or archiving them online for future reference.
- A frustration with the negative image of the City in the media.
- Suggestions that municipal politicians should be subject to term limits.
- Access to information is poor. Rarely do candidates go door-to-door, and literature is limited, so there is a need to get more information about all the candidates, not just the incumbents.
- Residents need to be reminded of how important municipal government is to them.

Next Steps

As the Task Force on Democratic Participation and Renewal enters its final phase, it is equipped with both its initial research and the results of a survey of some 658 voters with which to develop the recommendations that will form the principal part of its final report this fall.

At the outset, Task Force members examined four core areas for change;

- Alternative voting methods
- Convenience of voting
- Increased access to election information
- Civics and education (for all generations)

These four areas were incorporated into the citizen's survey earlier this year, and they will serve as a strong but not exclusive foundation of the Task Force's recommendation to Council. Ranging from consideration of internet voting, through the potential for extended voting hours to provide commuters greater access to voting locations, to an initiative to increase general information about all candidates contending for a Council seat, the Task Force is committed to providing Council with a series of progressive and forward-thinking suggestions to help improve the voting process and voter engagement in the City of Vaughan. A small sampling of the ideas currently under final debate by the Task Force are detailed below.

Alternative Voting Methods

Through its research, and as confirmed by a significant number of respondents in the citizen's survey, the Task Force is strongly in support of exploring internet voting as a new option to help engage younger voters, and those who would prefer to vote from the privacy of their home/office. Gauging the successes that the Town of Markham has

attained in the previous two municipal campaigns, there is an opportunity for Vaughan to emulate this approach and provide an additional layer of access to voter-residents. A full introduction, or a partial experiment (e.g. testing it out in the ward with the lowest voter turnout in the 2006 election), would show that the City is truly providing its residents with every opportunity to cast a ballot.

Convenience of Voting

Concerns about the hours of voting and the number of advanced polling days were raised throughout the Task Force's meetings in the first two years. The survey supported initial thoughts that earlier poll-opening times would be a help to early morning commuters, while extending voting hours beyond 8 pm would allow a substantial number of residents to cast ballots on their way home from work.

Increased access to election information

Recognizing that the City of Vaughan posts contact information (name, address, telephone, and email addresses) on all candidate seeking office, the Task Force has debated the merits of adding an additional field requiring all candidates to provide a biography (e.g., minimum 50 words) to provide the voters with basic information about the candidate and allow them to make an informed choice. The survey supported this concept, with most respondents indicating that they would review this page prior to making a decision on whom to vote for. The management of such information by the City would ensure its non-partisanship.

Civics and Education

The Task Force has also talked about amendments to the City Clerk's brochure about the upcoming election (Note: not to be confused with the Voter Identification Card), to provide an overview of what services municipalities provide to their residents. For many, they may not know what this level of government does, and a brief explanation could help engage residents as they then will be informed of the importance of casting a ballot in November 2010. Moreover, the layout of the brochure needs to be updated, to be more visually appealing, similar to literature for Concerts in the Park and our Recreation Guides, as the traditional one or two colour presentation does not attract the attention these brochures deserve.

Another concept under discussion is posting voter information ("Vote next Monday", "Vote TODAY!") on mobile signs in the same manner that the City does for garbage and recycling information. By doing so, it would serve as an added initiative by the City to help encourage residents to vote in 2010.

Relationship to Vaughan Vision 2020

This report is consistent with the priorities set forth in Vaughan Vision 2020

Regional Implications

Nil

Conclusion

Report prepared by:

Elliott Silverstein, Member, TFDPR

Respectfully submitted,

Tony Carella, FRSA	Steven Del Duca
Councillor – Ward 2, Co-chair	Co-chair
Task Force on Democratic Participation and Renewal	