

Council Meeting Best Practices**Report Purpose**

To provide Council with some options for consideration regarding the improvement of Council meeting efficiency and effectiveness.

Recommendation

THAT Administration prepare for Council's consideration, by the end of the second quarter of 2018, amendments to Bylaw 20-2015 as described in the chart entitled "Possible Meeting Procedures Bylaw Amendments" in the September 5, 2017 Legislative and Legal Services report.

Council History

May 9, 2017 – Council approved "THAT Administration prepare a report by September 12, 2017, that outlines the trends and best practices in terms of municipal Council meeting practices and duration in Alberta; includes information on studies done with respect to conditions for effective decision-making; and provides recommendations for Council's consideration on enhancing Council meeting effectiveness."

Strategic Plan Priority Areas

Economy: Improving meeting efficiency helps to ensure the best use of County resources.

Governance: Ensuring that meeting best practices are implemented supports and promotes effective Council decision making.

Social: N/A

Culture: N/A

Environment: N/A

Other Impacts

Policy: N/A

Legislative/Legal: Section 145(b) of the MGA provides that a council may pass bylaws in relation to the procedure and conduct of council, council committees, and other bodies established by the council, the conduct of councillors and the conduct of members of council committees and other bodies established by the council.

Interdepartmental: N/A

Summary

Council directed Administration to provide a report that addresses the trends and best practices in terms of municipal council meeting practices and duration as well as providing some recommendations for improving council meeting efficiency.

In general terms, council meeting efficiency is evaluated in the context of principles of good governance. Looking at these principles, one may consider the following: Is there a clear governance structure in place? What is the policy environment in which Council makes decisions? Is there a clear delineation between the role of council and administration? Are both parties able to perform their respective roles? Are there policies to help guide decision making?

There have not been any issues raised regarding the overall governance context of Strathcona County. Thus, this report looks at several logistical factors related to Council meeting efficiency: meeting frequency and duration; meeting procedures and agenda management; council decorum; and use of council committees. For each section, the report

Author: Sandy Bugeja, Legislative and Legal Services

Director: Mavis Nathoo, Legislative and Legal Services

Associate Commissioner: Lori Cooper, Corporate Services

Lead Department: Legislative and Legal Services

provides a summary of key considerations and notes some options for improvement, or, where applicable, notes actions that are already underway related to improved efficiency. The general rationale for improving meeting efficiency is that doing so supports sound decision-making, encourages public participation, and links to sound use of municipal resources.

Meeting Frequency and Duration:

While there seem to be similar trends in terms of council meeting frequency amongst medium-to-large size municipalities in Alberta, council meeting duration seems to vary widely. While there is limited hard data available on the “typical” duration and frequency of council meetings, a few municipalities, such as Edmonton and Toronto, provide some meeting data as part of their open data portals.

Edmonton’s most recent council meeting data-set tells us that Edmonton’s Council averaged 20 regular council meetings per year between 2011 and 2013 (does not include public hearings). This number of regular council meetings seems typical amongst medium to large sized municipalities in Alberta. The chart below provides the number of regular council meetings for various medium to large municipalities in Alberta in 2016.

Municipality	# of Regular Meetings of Council for 2016
Strathcona County	21 (public hearings included)
City of Edmonton	22 (additional 17 public hearings held)
City of Lethbridge	25 (public hearings included)
City of Calgary	21 (public hearings included)
City of Fort Saskatchewan	25 (public hearings included)
City of Red Deer	23 (public hearings included)

Having an adequate number of regular Council meetings helps to ensure that the decision-making process is responsive to the municipality’s needs. At present, Strathcona County’s council meeting frequency is consistent with that of other comparable municipalities.

In terms of council meeting duration, there is more variance between municipalities and there are a number of variables that will influence meeting length (e.g. number of public hearings, meeting frequency, use of council committees, number of special meetings, etc.). Recently, the City of Calgary undertook a study to address the length of their council meetings. According to a November 20, 2016 Calgary Herald article, their current average meeting duration is estimated to be 14 hours (had previously been 9.75 hours). Although Strathcona County does not keep statistics on council meeting length, a review of the meeting minutes from the first six months of the current year reveals that the average council meeting length is 7.75 hours. Looking at other municipalities, the average council meeting length does vary.

Municipality	Average # of Hours per Regular Council Meeting NB: includes public hearings except for Edmonton
Strathcona County	7.75
City of Edmonton	5.1
City of St. Albert	6.5
City of Grande Prairie	2.2
City of Calgary	14
Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo	3
City of Lethbridge	4.5
City of Medicine Hat	3.5

While there are a number of variables that impact council meeting length, if Council was interested there are some strategies for meeting efficiency that could be considered. The remainder of the report will provide some options for consideration to help achieve this goal.

Meeting Procedures and Agenda Management:

A number of municipalities include provisions in their respective meeting procedures bylaws to address council meeting efficiency. The chart below outlines changes that could be made to Strathcona County's Meetings Procedures Bylaw to help address efficiency.

Possible Meeting Procedures Bylaw Amendments

#	Description	Rationale
1	Require all motions to be seconded prior to debate	Requiring that all motions be seconded prior to debate ensures that there are at least 2 members of council who feel that a particular motion is worth consideration. While parliamentary experts are often divided on whether or not seconding is advisable for a smaller body such as a corporate board, seconding is ultimately considered helpful for legislative bodies. Seconding allows the body to dispense with a potential motion when this threshold is not met. While typically not required for smaller bodies, seconding of motions would be considered a best practice for legislative bodies.*
2	Mandatory adjournment times	Several municipalities have provisions in their respective meeting procedures bylaws that mandate their regular council meeting start and adjournment times. Should council be part of the way through an item when the appointed adjournment time approaches, council could pass a motion to complete discussing that item, but the motion would require a two-thirds vote. Any unfinished business would be held over until the next council meeting (NB: the idea is not to simply hold a vote to extend the meeting. Only voting to conclude the item that is interrupted by a mandatory adjournment).
3	Limits to debate	Several municipalities have provisions in their respective meeting procedures bylaws that mandate limits on debate. For example, Councillors may be limited to speaking only twice on any motion (typically once in debate and once to ask questions). Councillors may also be limited to a set time for speaking such as 5 minutes to ask questions on a motion, debate on a motion, ask questions on an amendment, debate on an amendment, and in reply when the councillor is the mover of the motion. These types of provisions are typically open to extensions by way of vote.
4	Consent agenda	The consent agenda is already used as a part of council meetings to address annual items or other non-contentious matters that are unlikely to benefit from debate. Council could consider looking for more opportunities to approve items by consent or could

		encourage the Mayor's Executive Committee to identify more consent items (NB: may require some amendments to the TOR of the Mayor's Executive Committee.) As always, any member of Council has the opportunity to remove items from the consent list at the start of the meeting.
5	Public hearings	We could look at the feasibility of holding public hearings once per month. Such an option would require further research and consultation with stakeholders to ensure that doing so would not unduly impact business requirements.

*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 11th ed. (RONR) provides that small boards, i.e. a board with less than 12 members, do not require a seconder for motions (488). While this statement is often used to argue against the practice of seconding, there is support for having such a practice in deliberative bodies such as a council. Seconding ensures that at least two members of a body are in agreement that a motion ought to be debated (RONR, 35).

Council Decorum:

Council decorum has not been raised as an issue at Strathcona County. The Meeting Procedures Bylaw provides direction on decorum (section 4.3) as well as a mechanism for addressing issues of decorum and issues related to breach of procedure (sections 4.4 to 4.10). Council sets policies and bylaws that provide the process for meeting procedures and the chair ensures that the meeting procedures and process are followed. In his article *Managing the Chamber*, George Cuff advocates for an appropriate level of decorum when it comes to council conducting its business in meetings. Decorum requires clear procedural rules, a willingness amongst members to adhere to those rules, as well as enforcement of the rules.

Use of Council Committees:

A final consideration is the use of council committees. In an ideal setting, council committees should help support council efficiency since committees can be used to explore particularly difficult topics or issues in great detail and then provide recommendations to Council. The County's use of council committees has been evolving. For example, Council has provided direction to Administration to revise the Priorities Committee Bylaw so that the Committee may be more effectively leveraged as part of the decision-making process. Further, Council has also recently approved a more structured process for providing direction to its various advisory committees via mandate letters. Since these changes are in progress, it is not possible to draw conclusions on their impact to meeting efficiency at this time. This issue may be more appropriately addressed in Q4 of 2018.

Enclosures:

1. Council Meeting Best Practice presentation