

Time Limits for Debate on Motions in Committee Meetings

ISSUE

The question of imposing a time limit for debate on motions in Committee meetings has been raised by members of City Council. What approach can City Council take to enhance its ability to debate the issues and make decisions?

BACKGROUND

History

On August 19, 2019, the Governance and Priorities Committee (GPC) dealt with an information report of the City Solicitor regarding an Inquiry of Councillor Hill related to procedural matters. During discussion of the matter, the question of imposing a five-minute time limit for debate on a motion in Committee meetings was raised. Administration committed to address the query as part of its review of potential amendments to *The Procedures and Committees Bylaw, 2014*.

The Leadership Governance Subcommittee (LTGS) provided a scan of procedures in other cities to the GPC at its meeting held on September 23, 2019, noting that the LTGS could produce a follow-up report outlining various options for consideration, should GPC be interested in recommending a change to the existing provisions for debate in Committee meetings. GPC subsequently resolved that the Administration report further on the matter of time limits for debate on motions in Committee meetings.

Current Status

Currently, *The Procedures and Committees Bylaw, 2014* does not restrict time for speaking on motions made during meetings of the Governance and Priorities Committee, or the Standing Policy Committees (SPCs). There is no limit to the number of times a member may speak to a question, and informal discussion of a subject shall be permitted when no motion has been made.

City of Saskatoon's Current Approach

The Procedures and Committees Bylaw, 2014 limits debate on motions during meetings of City Council only. No City Council member shall speak longer than five minutes on the same motion. The mover of the motion is given the first opportunity to speak and the mover is allowed a reply at the conclusion of the debate, which the reply shall not be longer than three minutes. City Council may, by a majority vote of the members present, allow any member to speak to the same motion more than once, or for longer than five minutes

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

A scan of the Cities of Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Regina was undertaken. Both Calgary and Edmonton appear to have limitations around speaking. The City of Edmonton provides for a Councillor to ask questions or speak multiple times in relation to a single item for a maximum of five minutes each time. The City of Calgary states

that a member's debate, including questions to Administration, but not Administration's responses must not exceed five minutes on a main motion, three minutes on an amendment, and three minutes for the Member who moved the main motion to respond to questions during debate.

OPTIONS

This section of the report offers four options for consideration. With the exception of option 1, all the proposed options vary slightly from one another. That is, they all propose time limits, but they are limited by length and scope. The options in this section are evaluated on the basis of how well they support the City's governance system, and the discussion and development of public policy.

Option 1: Status Quo

This option proposes to keep the City of Saskatoon's current approach. That is, time limits for debate will be limited to City Council meetings. Debate at all other Committees would not be subject to any time limits.

There are no new implications resulting from this option. Public notice would not be required to implement this option.

Advantages:

- no disruption to current practices; and
- no bylaw changes required.

Disadvantages:

- potential for longer meetings and incomplete agendas;
- potential for debate to steer off topic; and
- potential for some to monopolize debate.

Option 2: Implement a Five-minute Time Limit for GPC

This option proposes to implement a five-minute time limit on debate for items on the public session of GPC meetings. This option would follow the City's approach to imposing time limits at City Council meetings. Because membership composition of GPC and City Council are the same, there is a natural synergy with this approach.

There are no financial implications for this option. However, an amendment to Bylaw 9170 would be required to make this change. Implementation of this option could occur as soon as the bylaw is amended. This option does require public notice as it amends City Council's procedure bylaw.

Advantages:

- minor change to current practice;
- largely follows similar approach used at City Council meetings; and
- potential for more efficient meetings and less need to rush through agenda items.

Disadvantages:

- could be perceived as a way to limit discussion and/scrutiny on subjects; and
- requires amendment to the bylaw.

Option 3: Implement a Ten-minute Time Limit for GPC

This option proposes to implement a ten-minute time limit on debate for items on the public session of GPC meetings. This option is unique to the City in that no other type of meeting has a ten-minute time limit. Moreover, no other jurisdiction studied for this report uses such a time limit.

There are no financial implications for this option. Legally, an amendment to Bylaw 9170 would be required to make this change. Implementation of this option could occur as soon as the bylaw is amended. This option does require public notice as it amends City Council's procedure bylaw.

Advantages:

- provides sufficient time for members to speak on a topic; and
- some potential for more efficient meetings and less need to rush through agenda items when compared to status quo.

Disadvantages:

- could be perceived as a way to limit discussion and/or scrutiny on subjects; and
- implements a change to the existing system.

Option 4: Implement a Five-minute Time Limit for GPC and the Standing Policy Committee Meetings

This option proposes to implement a five-minute time limit on debate for items on the public session of GPC meetings and all SPC meetings. This option largely follows the approach used in the City of Edmonton.

There are no financial implications for this option. Legally, an amendment to Bylaw 9170 would be required to make this change. Implementation of this option could occur as soon as the bylaw is amended. This option does require public notice as it amends City Council's procedure bylaw.

Advantages:

- potential for more efficient meetings and less need to rush through agenda items when compared to status quo;
- ensures consistency of approaches for all meeting types; and
- provides equitable opportunities for members to participate in debate.

Disadvantages:

- could be perceived as a way to limit discussion and/or scrutiny on subjects, especially at the SPC level; and
- requires amendment to the bylaw and thus change to existing practices.

RECOMMENDATION

That a report be forwarded to City Council recommending:

1. That City Council implement Option 4, as described in this report.
2. That *The Procedures and Committees Bylaw, 2014* be amended such that debate for items on the public session for all Committees of City Council be limited to five minutes per member.

RATIONALE

One of the primary functions of City Council is to govern the City by debating the issues and making decisions. To assist this process, City Council has established various Standing Committees to address and focus on topics within their respective mandates.

For example, GPC is akin to a planning and priorities committee. It's composed of all members of Council and focuses on broader corporate wide topics and City Council priorities.¹ This mandate means that GPC also discusses several matters in a private session (in-camera or closed) in accordance with provincial legislation and Bylaw 9170.

The structure, composition, and mandate of GPC can make it challenging to get through agenda items in a timely fashion. According to the 2017/18 City Council and Committee meeting statistics review, GPC met for just over 69 hours in 2017/18.² This accounted for 25 percent of total City Council and Committee meeting hours in that year. Although the share of GPC meeting hours has been declining in recent years, it has typically exceeded that of City Council meetings, where time limits of debate do exist. As a result, there is strong rationale to support limiting debate at public (and private if necessary) sessions of GPC to five-minutes per member, per agenda item, subject to a motion to waive rules under special circumstances.

SPCs focus on narrower mandates that address specifically defined policy matters. The four SPCs are composed of five Councillors, plus the Mayor who is an ex-officio member (meaning that the Mayor is automatically appointed by virtue of the office). These Committees often hear from stakeholders and subject matter experts as key inputs into the public policy making process.

¹ For a detailed description of the Committee's mandate consult Bylaw 9170, found at: <https://www.saskatoon.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-clerk/bylaws/9170.pdf>

² For more details on this research, please see Governance Review – City Council and Committee Meeting Statistics – Second Edition, Revised Public Agenda, Governance and Priorities Committee. January 21, 2019. Found at: <https://pub-saskatoon.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=1a6de365-57ce-4dc7-803f-b36eeecfef6f&Agenda=Merged&lang=English&Item=36>

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According to research statistics from 2018, SPC meetings consumed between 22 and 40 total hours in a year depending on the Committee.³ Moreover, the four SPCs accounted for 45% of City Council and Committee meeting hours in 2017/18, an increase of about 20 percentage points since 2014/15. The data suggests that SPCs are dealing with more issues, with greater complexity, resulting in longer meeting times.

As a result, the Administration is recommending the implementation of a five-minute speaking limit for all Committees of City Council (specifically GPC and the SPCs). The primary reasons for proposing this approach are:

- It applies the same rules for all meetings (including City Council); thereby, increasing consistency and reducing any confusion.
- It provides equitable opportunities for members to participate in the debate. Members are less likely of weighing the merits of participating in debate versus trying to move through the meeting agenda.
- It provides a more efficient approach to managing agenda items.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS/CONSIDERATIONS

The City's governance structure allows City Council members to ask the Administration questions of clarity on reports that it submits. It is also permitted to ask stakeholders similar types of question on presentations or correspondence that they submit for the meeting to which the item is being addressed. This practice is in place so that City Council members can obtain necessary clarity before making a potential motion or debating the issue(s) on the meeting agenda. However, this practice is not formalized in Bylaw 9170.

At the October 21, 2019, GPC meeting, a procedural question was raised with respect to when motions can be made by Committee (or City Council) members. A Committee member attempted to make a motion while asking clarity questions from a stakeholder. The Chair instructed the member to hold off on the motion until after all questions to the Administration and stakeholders have been asked.

Subsequent to the GPC meeting, the Administration conducted research into the procedures and practices in other cities. For example, the procedure bylaws for both Calgary and Edmonton prescribe the process for the flow of agenda items at City Council and Committee meetings. They both, with minor variations, prescribe the process as follows:

- introduction of the item;
- administration and/or public presentation;
- questions of clarification from Members to Administration or stakeholders;
- motion for debate;
- debate of motion; and
- vote on the item.

³ See *ibid*.

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Thus, if City Council members would like to clarify this process and remove the discretion from the Chair, an amendment to Bylaw 9170 could be made that enshrines this procedure in it. The amendment would be similar to the procedures prescribed in the bylaws of Calgary and Edmonton.

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

If adopted, the proposed recommendations require an amendment to City Council's procedure bylaw. In accordance with City Council Policy No C01-021, the Public Notice Policy, public notice is required if the proposed recommendation is approved by City Council.

Report Approval

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