

Public invited to weigh in on communications at Town Hall

By Brock Weir

If residents aren't getting the message, it's time for them to weigh in on why.

That was the message taken to heart at Council last week as Councillors examine ways to improve Aurora's municipal communications strategy.

A number of shortcomings in the Town's communications with residents have been underscored by Councillors in recent weeks, particularly when it comes to renovations at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex and the redevelopment of the former Highland Gate Golf Course. Now, a wholesale re-evaluation of ways to communicate with Aurora residents could be in the offing over the next few months.

"I think as we go forward we need to put together a plan to engage [residents]," said Councillor Michael Thompson last week. "As one resident reminded me, we need to make sure we connect with them in terms of how best for the Town to communicate with its residents and vice-versa."

Councillor Thompson got the ball rolling on this initiative the previous week at the Committee Level, urging a review of Aurora's last communications plan from 2011. That plan, he said, indicates a more "progressive" approach beyond looking at "volume and how many times you did this and that." The big question needs to be is whether "this or that" is actually effective.

"Are we really getting that message out there to the residents, engaging them and pulling them in?" he questioned.

Discussions at General Committee, centred on this plan and figuring out the best way forward. The recommendations, said Councillor Thompson, suggested a Council workshop, but that needs to go further.

"Why aren't we including the residents in this workshop?" he asked. "Why aren't we reaching out to the residents and incorporating them into this process? At the end of the day, we work for the residents and if the message isn't getting to them, they should be part of this process."

Getting the public in on the action was something supported by Councillor Paul Pirri, who added that while this is "valuable", it is also valuable to get the ball rolling on that Council workshop to help hone that vision forward.

From the perspective of Councillor Sandra Humfries, "numerous communication problems" have been identified since the previous Council was elected in 2010 and engagement with residents is a must.

Supporting this view, Councillor John Abel summed up his own in two words: "Communication. Engagement."

Meanwhile, a prime opportunity to have residents weigh in on communications will be at next month's Aurora Street Festival, hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, added Councillor Thompson. This is a venue regularly used to engage residents, agreed Michael Kemp, Aurora's Manager of Corporate Communications. In this situation, as well as similar opportunities at events like the recent Aurora Home Show, all questions and suggestions from Aurorans are compiled and followed up on.

Recently, he said, the Communications Department partnered with five students from York University's Schulich School of Business who spent March Break doing surveys with people using Aurora's recreation complexes.

"The preliminary information [from the survey] suggests we're reaching out on the channels they want us to reach out onto, but they also have some good ideas and we've already started to implement those," said Mr. Kemp. "I am very encouraged by what I am hearing. Communications is one of those amorphous things where you can't necessarily get a full handle on the scope of what our

department does. We're open to share that with you more fully and receive any suggestions you have.?

Last year, Council voted down a recommendation to hire an outside consultant for \$30,000 to carry out a similar survey, asking staff to carry it out internally. When asked by Councillor Thompson whether this was the same survey that was carried out by the business students, Mr. Kemp said it was 'born out of that initiative' but streamlined to focus on marketing and communications, rather than marketing, communications and the Town's strategic plan as originally proposed.