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Municipal hiring freeze fizzles -- again

By Brock Weir

Despite general agreement that a closer watch needs to be taken at Town Hall to control new hires, a year-long freeze when it comes to new positions within the municipality has fizzled once again at the Council table.

A year-long hiring freeze was once again brought into the fore last week by Councillor Tom Mrakas, just two weeks after his initial pitch to Council to mothball any new positions in the year ahead failed on a tie vote with Councillor John Abel absent from the earlier meeting.

It was a repeat performance last week as, with Councillor Harold Kim's seat empty for the meeting in question, it once again failed ? this time 3 ? 5.
In his second pitch to Council, Councillor Mrakas said current hiring rates at Town Hall were just not sustainable. Crunching numbers, he presented a graph illustrating that between the years 2010 and 2015, Aurora's tax base had increased by 4.5 per cent, the population by 6.1 per cent, and staff numbers by 17.9 per cent.

?To me, and I think in any business, that is unsustainable,? he said, suggesting eight new positions would be pitched from staff during the upcoming budget process. ?You can't keep going this way. I understand we hear all the time about growth and, personally, I think the only growth the residents are seeing is the tax rate, and that is unfortunate for them. In these five years, staff have asked for 35 positions and in those five years, Council has approved 30. During a time of transition, we have a new interim CAO, a new CAO coming in January, we're doing an organizational review which we have all said is the best thing to do; why would we hamstring our new CAO with eight added new positions before he even walks through the door??

Supporting the motion were Councillors Sandra Humfryes and Councillor Wendy Gaertner. In her arguments in favour, Councillor Humfryes said a potential hiring freeze is not intended to ?cause negative feelings? as no one would be let go, and is standard practice in the private sector.

?It is to do more with less,? she said. ?Service levels are to be maintained or improved. It absolutely forces the organization, together across the board, to look at skillsets, look at what we have today and where we can redeploy. If you don't do it that way, if we don't deliver a message to ask the organization to look at it differently, we're not going to change the way we're thinking of doing business and we have to.

?Staff will step up to the challenge and deliver an exceptional year ahead where service levels are not impacted. It just forces everyone to think differently.?

Among those disagreeing with the principle was Mayor Geoff Dawe, who called the figures presented by Councillor Mrakas into question, noting the majority of people around the Council table had not yet been elected by the time the 2010 hires were approved.

?From 2011, which is when the majority of the people around this table took office, through 2015, there was a total of 18,? said Mayor Dawe. ?That would change that graph substantially. Whether it is right or wrong, I am not discussing, but for the majority of this table we have been responsible for a lot less in terms of staff.?

He said he agreed with the view offered by interim CAO Patrick Moyle that a freeze such as this is normally examined in the context of a budget, along with service levels. Considering something like this along with the budget allows Council to make a ?fairly well-informed decision? he said of everything that is on the table.

This was a view shared by the balance of Council who said they would like more information before them to see what the impacts might be if there was an all-out hiring freeze.

?I am not in favour of making this decision until we see all of the information, exactly who is being asked for,? said Councillor Paul Pirri. ?I am not saying that we're going to hire. I think it is wrong to infer based on the past there will be another eight hires. All I want to do is look at this as a whole. I want to know why our staff is indicating why they think they need to be hired and we can make that decision in an informed manner across the Council table.?

In stating his opposition, Councillor John Abel cited growth ? particularly if there was an influx of people coming in to use municipal facilities due to a greater population.

?I think staff is getting an idea of where this Council is going,? he said. ?We want to see a little more diligence on some of the spending. It has been known and I think they are getting the idea that come budget time they are not going to be coming in with a bunch of new hires open. I think through the CAO every course will be explored before that is brought for Council's consideration. It is a little more responsible to have these discussions at budget time when we have all the facts and impacts and directors being able to present why they are coming forward rather than us just making a decision in the summertime.?

Nevertheless, a further motion to defer the motion calling for a hiring freeze to the aforementioned budget talks failed on a tie vote, with Mayor Dawe, along with Councillors Abel, Pirri and Thompson voting against it.