

Audit needed for Joint Operations Centre: Council

By Brock Weir

An attempt to 'peel back the onion' on just where construction of Aurora's Joint Operations Centre went over budget left Council members with continued questions.

Last week, Town Treasurer Dan Elliott presented to Council, sitting at the Committee level, to answer many outstanding questions related to the construction of the Town's multimillion dollar Joint Operations Centre at the top of Industrial Parkway North.

The new headquarters of both Aurora's Public Works and Parks departments has been the subject of continual questions from local lawmakers on just what the final budget for the facility was and why items were taken out of the construction, and later added back in, so it could be boasted as delivered 'on time and on budget.'

Mr. Elliott's presentation was intended to close the book on many of these issues, pegging an over-spend at just over \$103,000, but many questions were still left on the table with blame being passed around by some and shouldered by others.

Noting the construction project, which was once overseen by the Director of Infrastructure who is no longer with the town, began with a contingency fund of \$1.83 million, Mr. Elliott said the budget might have been 'constrained' from the outset, questioning whether space needs or preconstruction work was included or considered when the \$20 million budget was first considered. Nor was the inclusion of a project manager, later brought on board to keep an eye on the build, accounted for at the beginning.

'That ate into our contingency accounts,' said Mr. Elliott. 'Despite our concerns and our knowledge and expectations for site servicing and grading that was already in the tender specification documents, there were some unforeseen soils and grading issues that resulted in change order costs which further shortened our contingency account.'

As the project rolled on, there was a matter of 'losing track' of what the actual running balance was, commitments being made to vendors, and the removal of some key elements 'so we could complete and open the facility with the money that was on hand.'

In his presentation, the Treasurer outlined a number of lessons learned from the JOC experience and how similar projects down the road could be better managed. The first, he said, is standardizing a project management framework for use by the Town, internal financial reporting and project management skills, and 'financial specialists to handle the dollars and cents.'

Council, however, was still left with questions. In addition to questions over the completion of asphalt on the driveways and parking lots at the building, once taken out of the budget, and now required to be brought back in at nearly double the original cost estimate, there were calls for an independent audit of the JOC project.

'I think probably one of the biggest mistakes, for want of a better term, is that we should have gone back and re-looked at the budget when we ran into soils issues because that did chew up an exceptional percentage of our contingency,' said Mayor Geoff Dawe, suggesting Aurora use York Region's audit services to bring a 'completely objective set of eyes' to the JOC process. 'That is certainly a lesson learned. Overall, I think we made the right decision and I think we have a good facility [but] we have learned a lot of things.'

Councillor Sandra Humfries echoed the mayor, stating that an auditor was needed to see what is still left outstanding on the JOC and to outline how it can be completed properly.

'We were not aware of projects being taken off and things being removed in order to meet the budget and I don't see that as straightforward or something I ever want to see again,' she said. 'We're not mind readers.'

The issue of 'accountability' was one heard throughout the discussion. Even former councillor John Gallo entered into the discussion, appearing at open forum questioning whether minutes from the Financial Task Force put in place to oversee the project were made available to Council and the public alike. They hadn't, said Mr. Elliott, when pressed by Councillor Michael Thompson with the same question, rather the reports brought to the task force were to serve that purpose.

'I think that is one of the failings,' said Councillor Thompson. 'The point of that committee was to identify those emerging risks to communicate that impact to members of Council so that we would have an ongoing dialogue and conversation about it. For whatever reason, a lot of these things that are coming out of the report this evening, to me, should have come out of having that Task Force. The purpose was to identify these things.'

Addressing Mayor Dawe and Councillor John Abel, both of whom sat on the Task Force, Councillor Thompson questioned whether or not these risks had been brought to their attention.

'I think that is patently obvious as to how we could have handled that,' said Mayor Dawe of the Task Force reporting back to Council.

Councillor Abel, on the other hand, said as a member of the Task Force his first questions were always 'Is it on budget?' and 'Is it

on time??

'Right from the word 'go' it looks like we were failing at the oversight we wanted to have there,' said Councillor Abel. 'While I thought asking if it was on budget and on time would suffice for oversight, the first time it came up we were cutting some things to remain on budget and on time, I started thinking, 'Okay,' and started hearing some feedback from the community. I came back and said, 'Let's not do this and cut things to appear like they are on budget.'

'It's a mess. I share some of the responsibility because it was my role and just being naïve, and asking at the meeting if it is on budget and on time is not enough. I had no reason to suspect anything otherwise.'