

Aurora and Newmarket to collaborate on info tech strategies

By Brock Weir

It has been in the works for nearly three years, but this spring the Town of Aurora is set to launch a new interactive website. The twist? It will be hosted by servers maintained by the Town of Newmarket.

This is just one example of collaboration between the two municipalities that is set for approval at Council this week.

With Council's approval, Aurora and Newmarket will take the first steps in coming up with a joint strategic plan for information technology, building upon already expressed desires from York Region's Northern Six (N6) municipalities to work closely together and collaborate on costly initiatives.

"In 2012, initiation of the joint website redevelopment project was the first attempt at illustrating how these two groups can leverage resources, benefit from economies of scale via a shared procurement process, leverage a shared infrastructure for hosting services, and manage a vendor together to facilitate change," said Aurora CEO Neil Garbe in a report before Councillors at last week's General Committee meeting.

"IT services from both municipalities are keenly supportive to innovation and change. Staff understand the benefits of a partnership project and also see how leveraging each other will provide municipalities with many strategic advantages. Staff [from both Towns] firmly believe that the development of a shared IT strategic plan for both organizations would be a good investment for solidifying and understanding the partnership benefits and the strategic direction for both groups for the next five years."

In the 2014 budget, Council approved \$80,000 to develop a solely Aurora IT Strategic Plan. If the recommendations are approved by Council this week, the money would be reinvested in the joint plan.

"We believe there may be some savings that we're hoping to report back and utilize some of those for some of the implementation of some of the early stages of a merger in some form," said Treasurer Dan Elliott, at last week's General Committee meeting, of moving forward with a consolidated IT plan with Newmarket. "We just don't know what the IT strategy is going to look like, but we do believe there's opportunities for us."

Councillors were largely supportive of the joint initiative at the Committee level last week, but questioned whether any money would be saved from working together.

"Many of these initiatives we embark upon is because it saves us money and here we are embarking on a joint initiative, yet there may not be any savings," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "For me, that is one of the considerations when we embark upon this."

Others were cautious about further collaboration between Aurora and Newmarket and what Councillor Evelyn Buck said would be marching toward amalgamation between the two municipalities.

"It seems we are finding more and more opportunities to work together with the Town of Newmarket," she said. "I think maybe people will start to wonder why we have two separate towns and administrations when we are turning more and more towards working together and being more efficient with our resources. It smells to me like amalgamation."

Another cautiously-leaning voice at the table was Councillor John Gallo, who questioned the development of the Town's website. Linking the development of the site, a project which has seen many starts and stalls, with the benefits of working together with Newmarket was not necessarily a selling point.

"If that is any indication of how things are going to work, we really need to figure it out," said Councillor Gallo. "That is almost a three-year project and I am sure everyone in this room would agree it is way below standard. I don't know if it has anything to do

with our partnership with them, if it was just us doing it, would we be any further ahead on that project??

In response, Mr. Elliott said problems that have plagued the project have been 'primarily' on the vendor's side.

'I know it is a cliché to point the finger at the vendor, but we do see success in that we have leveraged an arrangement where Newmarket is actually going to be hosting our website on their platforms and that is the partnership element we saw as a success. We're leveraging the technology behind the platform.'

Most enthusiastic in their support for the plan was Councillor Chris Ballard, who said he did not see moving forward as going down the 'slippery slope towards amalgamation.'

'I see this as a step towards cost savings and I think our taxpayers would be happy if we could do that for them,' he said. 'One of the things [I will be looking for in the strategic plan] is clear delineation of security of our data versus security of Newmarket's and some kind of firewall between those databases and how the information is stored.'

'I am sure that will happen but I want to make sure the information isn't being mixed and matched.'