

Complaints prompt Council calls for review of cell tower policy

By Brock Weir

Aurora needs to take a closer look at its own policies when it comes to companies looking to place telecommunications towers in and around Town, according to Council.

This was the conclusion drawn by a vast majority of Aurora's elected representatives when Council did an about-face on a proposed cell phone tower in the Town's south end.

Going into last week's Council meeting, members were set to issue a notice of concurrence to Industry Canada, effectively signing off on a new tower shared by Rogers and Bell in the Bayview Avenue and Bloomington Road area. Area residents, however, descended on Council chambers last Tuesday to speak out against the plan, citing not only health concerns but also the placement itself and a perceived lack of communication on the part of the telecommunications giants.

Council ultimately voted to issue a notice of non-concurrence to the regulatory body in a 6 -2 vote, with Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Paul Pirri voting against the motion. From Councillor Paul Pirri's perspective, Rogers and Bell ticked all the right boxes according to the Town's existing policy and that is why he had to vote for agreement.

‘It is one thing to be talking about whether or not they concur with the policies we have in place now or whether or not they don't concur with the policies we'd like to have in the future,’ he said. ‘For me, the question is whether or not they follow the rules that have been set out and I believe they have.’

Others, however, said they saw a key gap in the existing policy and now is the time to tighten it. While Aurora's policies with regards to cell phone towers lay out criteria on co-location amongst companies and how ‘and how far’ the companies must communicate and consult with surrounding neighbourhoods on a selected location, it does not speak to any distances that have to separate such towers from residents.

That will change if Councillors get their way.

‘I believe they followed the process as best they could and our staff did an outstanding job from that perspective,’ said Councillor Sandra Humfries who, along with Councillor Tom Mrakas, was one of just two Councillors to vote against the tower the previous week. ‘The essence of the problem here is the location that is being forced upon the residents. This location is the only place Rogers received concurrence for and if they didn't they would still be looking for a place right now. The policy was followed but I do not agree with this location.’

For her, a sticking point was the fact as presented by consultants from Rogers, that the proposed south Aurora cell tower was actually going to best serve densely populated areas just over Aurora's municipal limits with Richmond Hill.

‘I would have appreciated King not concurring when we had the Bathurst tower set up on their property for only Aurora residents,’ she concluded.

This was a view still shared by Councillor Mrakas, who said he was ‘disappointed’ there was not a provision in their bylaws to prescribe a distance requirement, as allowed under guidelines set forth by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

‘I wonder why we never actually had any bylaw that spoke to those distances and I think we need to take a hard look at that and set some rules and guidelines for future locations so when carriers come to the Town they know exactly what we are looking for before they come before us and we're looking at this situation,’ he said.

Since Council took its first stab at the matter at the Committee level the previous week, other members came around to this viewpoint.

‘I want to thank staff for following all the guidelines we have before us, but one of the biggest guidelines that is not really covered is

the location," said Councillor John Abel. "These people have lived here for decades in this location and they are being subjected to this antenna right next to their location and, to me, that is a very sensitive issue. To provide the demands on the growth that is just south of us, that growth has to take on some sort of [responsibility] looking after themselves. Councillor Mrakas took a stand on Canada Post. Other municipalities have taken a stand on the setback [for towers] and I think for a sensitive area it should have a minimum of 200m, if not 400 or 500."

Also voting against concurrence were Councillors Michael Thompson and Wendy Gaertner, the latter of whom was not present for the previous week's vote at the Committee level and spoke to the matter for the first time last week. For them, although they agreed with the comments on setting out a distance, there was also inadequate consultation with residents "another strike against concurring with the tower.

"It needs to be written into our protocol that we need to have public consultation with Council, staff and residents," said Councillor Gaertner. "The specific reason for non-concurrence is land use compatibility of the antenna system and I don't think this is compatible siting for this Tower. The other thing is the response of the affected residents. They elect us to represent them and that is what we need to do."

Added Councillor Thompson: "This situation has brought about a need to revisit our protocol and make some of those adjustments to speak to those situations where a tower moves and whether or not it necessitates a second or new consultation. There always seems to be these issues that occur and I think we need to err on the side of engaging our residents."

With Council's decision, Rogers and Bell now have the option of taking the matter to Industry Canada for dispute resolution.

Councillor Jeff Thom was not in attendance for the meeting.