

Council calls for better public engagement on Official Plan

Council has called on municipal staff to improve public engagement as just a handful of residents came out to Council Chambers last week to provide input on the Town's revised Official Plan.

Aurora is currently engaged in an Official Plan review, the results of which will act as a blueprint for municipal growth through 2041.

The February 11 meeting was intended as a way to receive feedback from members of the public on how they would like Aurora's future shaped before this feedback is sent back to staff for the development of a workplan. But, when just one member of the public stepped up to share their vision, Council raised questions about the process.

'If this is an exercise in checking a box off because the Planning Act tells us we have to have a Public Planning meeting, I think we would all agree we've failed miserably,' said Councillor John Gallo addressing his Council colleagues.

Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor Michael Thompson were not present for the meeting.

Councillor Gallo went on to note that it didn't make sense to have the Public Planning meeting on updating the Town's Official Plan (OP) before the Town had retained an outside consultant, as planned, to engage members of the public.

'I am here to listen to the public and I am prepared to get up and leave because that's done,' he continued, following the resident's presentation. 'I have plenty of time to speak into this microphone and engage in what I believe we should be doing with this process, but if we're here to listen to the public to guide this process, we've failed miserably and I will underline that. I have a whole bunch of questions, but I don't know the value to them.'

Although staff pointed out that more than 300 residents had been engaged in the OP process through several means, including 'planner pop-up events' that had been held at various municipal events throughout 2019, and a further 'dozen' residents attending an open house on the matter just prior to that evening's meeting, Councillor Gallo said the process was flawed.

'I want the public engaged in a significant way,' he concluded. 'I ran on that and I'm standing by that. I'm disappointed we're here and the chambers are virtually empty on a very important issue.'

This was a sentiment shared by many around the table, including Councillor Sandra Humfries who said although she was disappointed by the turnout, staff had done what they could to engage the public to this point

and further ? and, it is hoped, more fulsome ? consultation would take place once steering committees are in place to guide the OP review down the road.

?[We need to state] this is the future of your Town, how you want the Town to be, how you want to live here, and this is how you provide input,? she said. ?We need to take it seriously.?

Councillor Rachel Gilliland offered similar concerns.

?I really feel that staff is trying to do their job to get public engagement?and feedback, but I think my bone of contention is just where are they going to get this information,? she said, suggesting the public needs to have more information made available to them in order to provide a true opinion to Council. ?Even though this is the kick-off [meeting and] I understand it is very preliminary, it would be really good to know there is going to be another meeting that is formal, or something to give public feedback to also provide a copy to the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, York and all [surrounding communities because] I feel there is much content we can provide.?

Also speaking to the matter was Councillor Harold Kim, who chaired last week's meeting. He stated that there is rarely a huge turnout in Council Chambers as far as members of the public at large are concerned and ?context? was needed in the debate.

?We put out a Citizen Budget for online surveys, we've done that for many years, and we don't get that much of a response, so to actually get 300 [responses from the planner pop-ups] I think that is quite an accomplishment,? he said. ?Almost assuredly, we would like to have more feedback. I don't want to harp on staff and the lack of response we have had, but relative to similar types of events, I think this is quite good. Unless we're building a sidewalk or monster home, you're not going to pack this room and you're not going to get email or survey responses.?

Nevertheless, Council decided another Public Planning meeting would need to be held to solicit input from residents, voting to hold another session after the consultant is hired and their own public consultation is compiled and sent to staff for a review and report.

?I still think if there's not a huge risk in delaying our input to the municipalities and the Region, if we could try when the consultant's on board to try and engage further public input, see what the next public planning meeting holds,? said Councillor Humfries. ?If it is the same turnout, we've done the best we could. If not, and we have a fulsome turnout, then we have [done so] without risk and it gives [the Town a chance] to really come out and share their thoughts and ideas.?

By Brock Weir