Councillors want to be part of study to reduce municipal risk at Town Hall

Can Council decisions put the Town at risk?

That was the question posed to consultants last week as Council reviewed recommendations for a new Risk Management Policy for the Town.

A Risk Management Policy at the municipal level helps ?minimize uncertainty presented by risks? and is an important part of corporate governance.

Aurora's policy hasn't been revised since it was first introduced in 2001 and, according to staff, is outdated.

?The proposed Risk Management Policy aims to ensure the Town has an appropriate risk management framework that is supported by consistent policies and procedures that can be easily implemented by staff,? said paralegal Sarah Gill in her report to Council. ?Municipalities end up with some of the biggest risks in society and provide critical services where mistakes can be costly, both financially and in terms of life safety. The proposed Risk Management Policy provides a concise policy statement that embraces and commits to enhanced risk management in all aspects of the Town's operations, not just insured risk.?

What constitutes a risk, however, raised eyebrows around the Council table when presented at the Committee level last week.

Through discussions with Town Staff, 81 individual ?risks? were identified by consultants through meetings with Town Staff. Last week's General Committee meeting looked at 13 of the ?key? risks: underfunding of asset management; cost overrun or delay with the Town Square project; the global pandemic; recession; blockage of storm ponds resulting in flood; employee mental health deterioration; insufficient human resources; transgression by resident or other person; liability for sanitary or storm sewer backup; windstorm damage; winter storm damage; liability for third party bodily injury; and unplanned work arising from Council decisions.

It was this last ?key risk? which prompted questions from Council and calls to be included in the risk management process.

?I believe it is extremely important for a municipality to have a risk management policy?to bring it into the 21st century, so to speak, address, and have a plan for various needs,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?However, I am not in support of the policy in front of us because I feel it is flawed and it must be flawed when one of the key risks within the organization is Council decisions and/or notices of motion. How can that be a key risk?

?Council decisions are the will of the people. We're elected by the people, so shouldn't the will of the people not be a key risk but rather a reflection of the values of the organization? How we came up with that must indicate a flaw in the process or system.?

Council, he said, ?needs to be involved in the development of this risk policy.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she agreed with this assessment, as did Councillor John Gallo, who said Council should be a part of the development of such a ?major? policy.

?It seems to me that some of the top things that are key are, again, about work arising from Council decisions, but that's what our job is to do: make policy, change, and move the Town forward towards something progressive and the will of the people,? concurred Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ?On top of that, it's really focusing on the lack of human resource and the stresses that is putting on staff, I guess, to perform those duties. It is just trying to understand, maybe having a circle of understanding with Town Staff, to know where the context of this is coming from with Council and working with staff in trying to understand that and how it puts it above 80 things organizationally.

?What is it that we can do to narrow down and actually make those changes? It is significant to be top five, six, seven, or eight out of

80.?

Added Mayor Tom Mrakas: ?We are all in agreement and I think maybe the best thing for us at this point is if someone wanted to refer this back to staff.?

That is just what Council voted to do.

Once complete, the corporate-wide Risk Management Policy will, according to staff, ?require a significant shift in the way the Town operates.?

?The implementation?will require management and corporate-wide training and development for new and existing staff. Further, in order to properly implement [the framework], the next step in the program is to revise existing processes and develop new procedures. The development of best practices will guide staff in effective risk management, improve service levels, address operational and strategic risks, and minimize the Town's losses related to claims.?

By Brock Weir EditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter