

IN GOOD COMPANY: Setting Priorities

By Mayor Geoff Dawe

It has been two months since my last In Good Company column, and much has taken place over that span. Every February, instead of a column, I sit down with Auroran Editor Brock Weir to outline priorities for the year and the municipal term.

This annual tradition offers a great chance to keep residents apprised of the priorities and direction that Council is taking, and I thank Brock for his February 19 article highlighting my proposed parking plan for downtown, our efforts to acquire property for recreation space, as well as our need to address the outstanding issues of Library Square and our Hydro Fund.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for providing the chance to speak to their members at my annual Keynote Address on February 18. It was a packed house at King's Riding Golf Club, and a great environment to re-connect with our business community and hear their ideas and concerns.

As you may have noted, Council recently passed an \$18-million 2015 Capital Budget, which includes plans for the reconstruction of Industrial Parkway South, Vandorf Sideroad, Bluegrass Drive and Steeplechase Avenue. It also allows us to add new, accessible playground equipment to Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park and repave the Aurora Community Centre parking lot.

Council is now in the process of finalizing the 2015 Operating Budget, which should be complete in April. As I write this column, we are working with a potential property tax levy increase of 5.09 per cent. While I am still committed to finding efficiencies that would lower this further, I would like to take the opportunity to address some of the budget pressures our community faces.

Over the course of the last term, a sizable portion of our tax levy increase ? in each of the four years ? was dedicated funding to phase in the cost of a new fire truck and 20-firefighter crew approved by a previous Council. The decision to have a new fire crew was a good one, a decision made with the best interests of the safety and security of our residents, homes and businesses. The puzzling part of the decision was not to have a funding plan in place to accommodate this enhanced level of service.

I have never subscribed to the notion of making an investment decision without a business case. The lack of financial foresight in this instance put the burden of tax increases on a different Council.

As our community has just added 8,000 new residents with the opening of new subdivisions in our 2C lands, we are faced again with the necessity of bolstering our fire service. We are fortunate that we keep our costs in check by partnering with our neighbours in Newmarket to ?share the burden.?

It is imperative we deliver the same excellent level of fire service and fire prevention to residents of new subdivisions as it is to existing ones. This will necessitate additional fire resources.

Unlike past decisions, however, our Council is putting a plan in place to undertake a multi-year phase-in of costs immediately. It is our decision to improve fire service, and we are taking responsibility for the costs associated with that decision.

Fire costs are once again driving tax levy increases. But these are prudent investments to protect our residents, our homes and our businesses. We have a duty of care to meet, and we will not shirk from this responsibility. Safety is far too important to ignore.

Before signing off, I would like to touch upon a few other developments. On February 27, the Town received a redevelopment proposal for Highland Gate. I urge any interested residents to view or download the proposal, which is available on the Town website.

On February 28, I participated in a pick-up basketball game with members of Council at the newly renovated Aurora Family Leisure Complex. After a year-long facelift, the AFLC looks fantastic! It now features a Youth Centre, called The Loft, a new gymnasium, running track and skateboard park. I urge you to check out the new and improved AFLC with your family!

With warmer weather, many are venturing back onto our trails and into our parks. A friendly reminder to please have your dogs leashed, as our bylaw staff will be out enforcing our animal control bylaws. If you want to go leash-free with your pet, please visit our leash-free park on Industrial Parkway North.

On April 4, our very popular Easter Egg Hunt takes place at the Aurora Seniors' Centre. Tickets are still available at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex and Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex for \$5 per child. Parents and guardians are free. I hope to see you there!