

## Mayor pitches Town-wide WIFI, deems it a necessity not luxury

As people are working and learning at home more now than ever before, affordable high-speed internet is now a necessity rather than a luxury and everyone in Aurora should have access, according to Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Mayor Mrakas next week is set to pitch Town-wide WIFI to Council next week.

In a motion up for consideration at next week's Council meeting, Mayor Mrakas is calling on municipal staff to "investigate existing models of municipally-implemented WIFI services to develop a proposed model for Aurora" and look at public-private partnership models to make it happen.

"Ultimately, this is to look at how we can get to a point where it can be Town-wide," says Mayor Mrakas. "We might need to start on a smaller scale and that is why we want staff to investigate it. Right now, we have WIFI services within our facilities and I think the first step to expand it [is] to outdoor properties such as Town Park and all other relevant parks within the Town. Maybe from there, we can expand it to where it becomes a Town-wide initiative."

Going down this route would position Aurora to become a "Smart Town/City" where "everything is interconnected and [people] can easily access information" and engage with the Town easily and through reliable channels, he adds.

"The bigger issue is when you look at what we have gone through in the pandemic and what it has shown us is a lot of people don't have access to the internet. We need to be able to provide internet access to all of our residents, and not for streaming video, not for downloading movies and stuff like that; it is to provide them reliable access, whether it is to fill out a form, whether they need to do something from a medical perspective?schooling is becoming more geared towards online learning and some people are [talking about] hybrid systems when it comes to learning. When you think of some of those families that might not be able to afford internet access, how are they able to provide that for their kids or even for themselves to be able to find out their medical history or maybe speak to a doctor so they don't need to go into the office? We need to be able to provide that type of service to our residents to make ourselves a better Town for everybody."

Since Mayor Mrakas' motion was published last week, a number of questions have been raised, including who might be able to access, if it would mean more telecommunications towers, and even whether the Town is "trying to create our own telecom company," but that, he says, is a "misunderstanding" of the objective.

"Whichever way we decide to go as a first step, whether that's full-out Town-wide or whether that's just in our parks and expanding to our parks and all of our properties, that would go out to RFP and we would look at companies coming back and seeing what they can provide us into hooking us up through a WIFI system," he says. "It is not that hard of a system to be able to hook up, it is not about adding more towers."

"I think there is some misconceptions. I think ultimately if you ask anyone, without adding new towers, without us creating a telecom company, if we can provide basic WIFI service right across the Town that everyone would be able to hook up to" would that be something they think is beneficial, and ultimately if it is cost-effective? I think if you would ask the majority of the people, yes, that would be a service we should provide for our residents. When you look at AMO (Association of Municipalities Ontario), when you look at even from the Federal and Provincial government, everyone now is starting to realize and the conversation has shifted to broadband internet being a luxury to being a necessity. I think that is what everyone needs to remember: where we're moving to in the future, broadband internet, WIFI access is not a luxury; it is a necessity for all of our residents and not just the ones who can afford it."

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter