

Questions raised over actual costs of Joint Operations Centre

By Brock Weir

A final report on Aurora's new Joint Operations Centre raised eyebrows of Councillors last week raising questions whether or not the building came in under or over budget.

Convening for the first time in the New Year last Tuesday night, Councillors sitting at the Committee level dissected a document from Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, which was intended to be a 'final report' on the status of the project. For some Councillors, however, it was just the start of what could prove to be a number-crunching game.

Last year, Aurora's infrastructure and parks departments moved into the new Joint Operations Centre (JOC) near the top of Industrial Parkway North, the former works on Scanlon Court sold to help finance the new building for a budgeted \$20.5 million dollars.

In his report, Mr. Simanovskis notes that the Council of the day was provided with a full scope of all the amenities that could be a part of the JOC, but several items such as a green roof, an entry pylon sign, on-site landscaping, and a fuel monitoring system were left off the final menu, to meet budget demands and be investigated for implementation at a later date.

'The report recognized the net impact of additional site development costs and offered a number of scope reduction options to bring the project costs in line with the budget,' said Mr. Simanovskis in his report, noting that these reductions helped knock just over \$102,000 off the final project budget. 'Reductions that were considered were identified as work that could either be completed at a later date, at a lower cost (by staff or other contracted services), or could be deleted with minimal impact to the project. These scope reductions were approved by Council to maintain the project budget targets.'

Last week's report, however, had one detail which brought up a significant discussion: the fuel monitoring system. Mr. Simanovskis notes the system was 'not essential to the operation' of the fuel dispensing system at the JOC but, 'to take full benefit of the monitoring and control features of the fuelling system, staff requested consideration of the controls component in the 2017 capital program as a separate capital project. These items result in a total net budget impact of \$269,500 or 1.3 per cent over the approved budget.'

'My general thought as I was reading through this is it is like someone giving me a budget to buy eveningwear for the next few years and, during the process, I find I don't have sufficient budget for a tie, cufflinks, shoes, and belt,' said Councillor Harold Kim, who was not on Council when the initial budget for the JOC was approved. 'However, I could buy a belt at a future date at a lower cost should my pants start falling down.'

Councillor Pirri, who was part of the decision-making team when this was approved in 2014, offered a similar perspective.

'I think we have skirted this issue a little bit and here's my difficulty: I think we need to do a little bit more work on this to figure out what happened. Looking back at it now, and hindsight is always 20/20, in August 2014, a few months before an election, certain elements were removed from a tender so the project came in under-budget by \$100,000.'

'I think, as a whole, this Council has always strived to provide real and accurate information and tried to provide numbers that aren't hidden throughout our budgeting process; we publish both our rate increase as well as the Regional rate increase to [be] as open as possible. Looking at it in hindsight now, it is not something that looks good.'

Many Council members around the table, he said, questioned how this happened. Among them was Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said eliminating certain items from the budget 'particularly the fuel monitoring system' knowing that they would be needed down the line 'sets a false sense' of costs to the community.

'Realistically, when I look at it and when I go through this, it didn't come within budget, it actually came in overbudget,' said Councillor Mrakas. 'To me [on the fuel monitoring system] I am hearing two things: we didn't need it, so we moved it out because it wasn't essential. Then I am hearing we actually do need it to keep it moving properly. To me, it is just a way of circumventing what the budget number is. I have concerns and I think moving forward we need to deal with this and have [the information] properly put out for us and for residents.'