

Residents want less spent on 'culture', according to Aurora's Citizen Budget

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents have spoken, and they want less tax dollars spent on 'culture' ? at least according to the results of the Town's first Citizen Budget.

The Citizen Budget was an online tool launched by the Town of Aurora last fall. It broke down many of the components of Aurora's annual budget allowing residents to slide bars and otherwise provide input on how they would like their tax dollars spent, and allowed them to see the impact on their tax rate in real time.

Over 100 people participated in the survey, responding to how they would like tax dollars spent in the areas of community planning, enforcement and licensing, animal control, road network operations, snow management and plowing operations, solid waste management, municipal facilities, community programs, parks, trails and open spaces, cultural services, fire and emergency services, infrastructure rehabilitation and replacement, and the Aurora Public Library.

According to a report before Councillors last week at the first Budget meeting of the 2015 season, the majority of participants selected 'no change' across the board with the exception of cultural services, where the most common response was a 10 per cent reduction.

'It sounds to me like we're pretty much on the mark with what our community is looking for,' said Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, on the results. 'Two of the respondents were from within our organization and 102 of the residents of the Town responded, and clearly that is a lot more than you see in the audience tonight, and it is a whole lot more than we have ever had in the Council Chamber with respect to budget in my term here.'

A potential reduction for Cultural Services caught some Councillors by surprise, and dominated much of last week's discussions surrounding the Citizen Budget.

'I find it surprising in terms of the feedback I get from the community,' said Councillor Sandra Humfries. 'It is always very positive when we get to cultural events. It makes Aurora what it is [and] I find it curious.'

Councillor Humfries was among those who questioned whether that particular question was specific enough to get a feel on which areas under the large umbrella of 'culture' residents may be dissatisfied with. Michael Kemp, Aurora's Director of Corporate Communications, said there were opportunities for participants to provide additional comments at the end of the survey, but this was limited.

'It may be that 'cultural services' is so encompassing that many people may not relate it to special events offered by Mr. Downey's department,' said Mr. Kemp, on the Parks and Recreation Department directed by Al Downey. 'Maybe that is something we can look into. The intention is to roll this out again and use it as an ongoing tool and get an apples to apples comparison year over year and see if there is any change in the public attitude. That is certainly something we could look into whether we nailed down a more specific definition of cultural services, whether that would change anything.'

Responding to questions from Councillor Wendy Gaertner, Mr. Kemp added the description regarding 'cultural services' was general.

'What we tried to do with this is make it as succinct as possible,' he said. 'The downfall of this is the more information you tend to put in the survey, the fewer people answer the survey. It takes them longer to read it, it takes them longer to answer. The average time to complete the survey was gauged at seven minutes, which I think is a reasonable amount of time.'

During discussions, Council said they saw the value in using the tool to get into more of the specifics down the road.

?In the short period of time staff had to put it together, I think it is a very good first crack at it,? said Mr. Kemp. I would certainly like to see it develop over time so the questions are more relevant and specific to some of the issues we face so we can get more detailed information, [provide] a little bit more input from citizens, as well as take a little bit more time to draft it up. If there is a decision to continue forward, we should take what we like and continue improving it.?