

Strategic Plan update stirs debate around Council table

By Brock Weir

Aurora is a Town with a vision ? but, for some Councillors, updating this vision might be a bit far sighted at the moment.

The Strategic Plan is Aurora's primary planning document, setting out a vision to 2031. It not only sets the long-term vision of the municipality, but a number of shorter-term goals to help along the road, whether they are community-related goals, or goals related to the environment, growth, infrastructure, the economy and good government.

Council redeveloped the plan in 2011 before formal approval in 2012, but now staff are recommending it is time to take another look at this vision and take on consultants to help steer an update of the plan.

But how much of an update is needed?

That was the question raised by many Councillors last week as they addressed the recommendation at the Committee level. A lot of work was put into the plan back in 2011, said Councillor Michael Thompson, but the recommendation, in his view, read more like a wholesale re-drafting of the existing plan.

?The document states it is to 2031,? he said. ?It seems to me like we are redoing it all. We're creating a steering committee, we're going out to tender, we're doing the same consultation process. The whole process is almost exactly the same as what we did the first time. I wanted a much [simpler] process and the report concerns me. We could end up with a brand new vision and action plan and redo what we have already done.?

The intent of the proposed update is to provide ?validation? of what they already have, said Anthony Ierullo, Aurora's Manager of Long-Range and Strategic Planning. From his perspective, community engagement is key in a validation process and the proposal before Council is a ?slimmed down? version of the previous efforts.

?We haven't proposed a lot of the intercept interviews, a lot of the community event consultation like we have done in the past; it is really just focused on stakeholder feedback, Council workshops and ultimately Council is the community's voice around the table,? he said.

Councillor Thompson nevertheless questioned whether it was necessary to hire a consultant to take this on if it was truly a ?validation exercise? and suggested it could be done in-house. Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, however, said best practice is to have a third party carry this out with an independent eye.

For others around the Council table, the recommendation was premature. Councillor Tom Mrakas, for instance, said it is important to first look at what Aurora has achieved under the latest Strategic Plan. Although he supported further studies be carried out independently, Councillor Paul Pirri offered a similar viewpoint. It's time, he said, to go back to the people originally consulted in the 2011 plan and get a sense of how goals have been achieved.

?I really believe we need to step back,? added Councillor Sandra Humfries. ?What I would love to see is staff take a second attempt at this to put together a steering committee of staff and Council only to begin with and have that smaller group look and review the action plan and business plans against that strategic plan. I think a smaller group can make a decision on next steps.?