

Town Hall needs to step up communications with residents: Council

By Brock Weir

As complaints rolled in over the renovations of the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, many residents and club members complained over a lack of communication over what was happening with the Industrial Parkway Facility ? and that is just one gap that needs to be addressed at Town Hall, according to Council.

Councillors unanimously approved a review of Aurora's corporate communications policy last week, citing a number of potential shortcomings in the system. In addition to the Aurora Family Leisure Complex (AFLC) example, other issues were, according to Councillor Michael Thompson, inadequate communication over Council nixing the heavily-promoted, controversial Clear Bag garbage program earlier this year, and the decision to not proceed with reducing the composition of Council following last fall's referendum vote.

In his dual notices of motion, Councillor Thompson not only called on Town Hall to ?create awareness? of the final decisions on clear bags and the referendum questions, but also lay the groundwork for a wholesale review of the Town's Corporate Communications Policy.

?When I first came to Council [in 2010], there was some discussion around the table in terms of priorities and things you would like to see,? he said.

?For myself, and some other members who are here, we all stress the importance of communication, that we really wanted to see communication enhanced and be a significant strategic pillar with regards to how we engage and interact with our residents. During my time here, there has been some challenges with regards to the communications with residents. I don't feel we're meeting their expectations.?

As such, the Corporate Communications Policy will be before Councillors at the Committee Level for review this week. Adopted in 2011, Councillor Thompson said many of the tenets within it are outdated and in need of revision. Communications is a ?vital strategic component? of any Councillor's job in serving the residents and a better plan needs to come through.

?There are so many things we can adopt into the plan to help broaden the scope, but when I look at the plan, I look not just at the avenues which we take to communicate with residents, but our website and all these different initiatives,? he concluded. ?Hopefully by the end of this term, we will all be in a place where the residents are much better informed, better engaged, and active.?

No objections were expressed around the table, and the motion was duly seconded by Councillor Tom Mrakas. Speaking in favor of the motion, Councillor John Abel said the word ?communication? often comes up in daily interaction with residents.

?It seems to be at every issue we're talking about,? he said. ?We commit considerable resources to this department. We want, as a Council, to address what we perceive as shortcomings and how we move forward and how to better enhance the need to communicate with our residents.?

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner: ?I have been talking about increased accountability and transparency for many years, and anything that supports that I certainly will support.?

In the other motion to communicate out the results of Council's decision on the referendum and Clear Bags, Councillor Thompson said these were issues residents were particularly engaged on and, when push came to shove, there was no formal communication outside of local media, to communicate Council's final decisions to residents. For Councillor Sandra Humfries, this is an example of a ?loop? that needs to be closed.

?Our communications department has the qualifications to take that information and close the loop,? she said, referencing the

Council Highlights package made available to the public a day or two after each bi-weekly Council meeting. ?Items that get shut down and don't move forward are no longer communicated and that needs to change. I am looking forward to a fresh perspective looking at [the Corporate Communications Policy] and utilizing all tools in the communications industry on how we can communicate out.?

Added Councillor Thompson: ?We work for the residents. We need to let them know what is going on. If we're not doing a good enough job, let's fix it.?