

Website upgrade aimed at increasing online municipal services

By Brock Weir

A \$70,000 upgrade to the Town of Aurora's website is aimed to increase online services available to residents.

Council gave the formal green light to the upgrade project at the last Council meeting, paving the way for a project that was tentatively approved in last year's budget.

According to Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith, the Town's Manager of Corporate Communications, the upgraded website would increase online services and tools available to residents, make it more user-friendly, increase security, and better position the Town to promote programs that generate revenue.

During the 2018 Capital Budget deliberations, Council provided conditional approval of \$70,000 to redevelop the Town of Aurora website, said Ms. Mackenzie-Smith. The capital budget request came as a result of Council expressing the need for website improvements as a result of comments from residents.

According to her report, the current municipal website was built in 2015 for \$70,000, built in conjunction with a similar website for the Town of Aurora, and hosted by the latter.

The result was a website with multiple challenges relating to not only usability and navigation, but also back-end technology.

[Based on feedback], the website is not mobile device responsive and requires a third-party service to display website content in a way that is accessible to mobile devices, she said. This service does not work seamlessly for all devices and prevents many website pages and tools from being viewed and used in the appropriate manner when viewed on a mobile device.

The Town website is one of our primary methods of communication with our community. On a monthly basis, the site sees between 26,000 and 30,000 users with more than 40,000 sessions between them. Approximately 68 per cent of visitors are returning visitors, with 32 per cent being new visitors. The site receives more than 100,000 page views per month with the average user visiting two to three pages for two to three minutes. Approximately one-quarter of all website traffic is via mobile device.

Addressing this issue, a new search function was added to the website last year, she said, and there was consideration given to upgrading the site in 2018, but it was decided to hold off due to resourcing strains as well as making changes to the website in the midst of introducing electronic voting.

Once the new website is completed and launched, it will feature a news tool to allow residents to sign up for news alerts, mechanisms to allow the Town to better communicate emergencies such as extreme weather events with residents, integrate social media, and make Place Speak, an app allowing residents to red flag areas of concern across Aurora, more prominent.

For many Council members, a new website has been a long time coming.

I [have been] extremely frustrated with the current system for many years, actually, in terms of searchability, said Councillor John Gallo, before making a suggestion on what he would like to see featured. There are times where there are reports on the website that are scanned in as images and when you're doing that you can't search for text. It makes things very frustrating if you're trying to do a word search, you know it is there, and it just doesn't pop up. It's a process we shouldn't be doing. I am very happy to see what we're doing there and I am really looking forward to the end result.

Added Councillor Rachel Gilliland: I am super-excited about this because I have one heck of a time trying to find things on our website. I am really happy we're having this upgrade happen.