

Working from home could pose additional budget pressure on Town: Mayor

Having municipal staff continue to work from home could cause additional budget pressures for the year ahead, according to Mayor Tom Mrakas.

The Town kicked off deliberations over the 2021 Operating Budget last week and, at the outset, the Mayor said additional factors might need to be considered before Council can have a full picture of how COVID-19 might impact the Town's financial situation.

"Due to the pandemic, we could be asking those staff who can work from home [to] continue to do so until at least June," he said. "In light of this, I have spoken to our CAO and have asked staff to look at ways to mitigate the potential for additional financial burden to the Town as a result of COVID-19 in 2021, which would include the potential moratorium of some hiring."

"With the unique circumstances this pandemic has created on the Town, we need to turn over all the stones and ensure that the budget we pass helps residents today while not risking the future for our Town."

After getting this out of the way at the start of the meeting, he told Councillors that although there are eight new hires accounted for in the 2021 budget, discussions related to these positions should be kept to a minimum until updated information comes forward.

But new hires ultimately figured in this first go-round, including a new position related to the booking of municipal facilities.

"We have had a decrease in bookings in community service, a mild increase the following year, and then another decrease," said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. "I am looking at more rationalizing [for] that position right now when our community service levels are going to be running very low. Maybe it would be more prudent on us to make a hold on this position."

Responding to this concern was Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services.

The position in question, she said, was based on growth projected last year.

"We recognize in 2020 we have had an interesting year for sure based on COVID, but I will say with each of the adaptations [on pivoting municipal programs and services to meet the most up-to-date health measures] there is a significant amount of work with every change the Province comes out with. In fact, our team is continuously busy with every adjustment and sometimes in a very short turnaround time to adapt to latest orders, including the most recent as an example of having to adjust to the 28 [days in Stage 2] but then the pullback ended after only being three weeks."

Trying to bring those programs back online and adjusting other factors keep the team "very busy," she said.

"It is tough to understand, but I have seen this team in action and every dialogue back and forth with the user groups there is constant adjustments being made, so I certainly have more detail I can provide Council through email if that is an additional support for you," she told Council. "But, at this time, we feel a need for this position going forward."

Replied Councillor Gilliland: "It is good to know you have been adapting. Perhaps it is more of a short-lived adaptation we're going through with the Provincial changes, maybe those pressures ease over the summer? maybe it is better to look at that position a little bit later, that is all I am suggesting. If it is something we could wait till 2022 as opposed to 2021, like that extra year until we have a handle on what the pandemic? if we get that vaccine [announced by Pfizer last Monday], maybe things will go back to normal and we can see a reason to look at that. I think we're all learning, we're all kind of overworking in other areas. It could just be a temporary measure."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter