

Council pours cold water on hiring freeze

By Brock Weir

Council has nixed a proposed one-year hiring freeze of employees at Town Hall in favour of a new 'vacancy control' program developed by new interim CAO Patrick Moyle.

Local lawmakers tasked Mr. Moyle with the program at his first Council meeting after a full hiring freeze for the period of one year fell on a tie vote of 4 ? 4. (Councillor John Abel was not in attendance)

The hiring freeze was proposed in a notice of motion from Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said a moratorium on new and replacement positions should be in place ahead of the 2016 Budget Process.

'In my mind, if we're going to implement or institute something like this we would want it done just ahead of the budget so that way our directors and staff realise this is what Council is looking to do and, therefore, these new positions wouldn't be brought forward to budget to be discussed and staff can deal with different aspects of the budget and concentrate their efforts on those things to help bring that budget number to where it needs to be, at the tax rate we always say is too high and we have to work on it.'

The suggestion, however, failed to gain traction with a majority of Council members, particularly Councillor Paul Pirri who said Council did not have enough information before them on what each Town Director had in mind for future hires and vacancy replacements over the year ahead.

'I am not in favour of a decision without knowing all the information that goes into it,' he said. 'We can wait until we get all of the information so we just don't get 'something' done, but make sure we do the right thing.'

This was a view shared largely by Councillor Jeff Thom, who said referring the freeze to the budget process would allow time for this information to come forward and impacts it might have. A similar sentiment was expressed by Mayor Geoff Dawe as new hires can address issues that could crop up due to growth in the foreseeable future.

'We're in a high growth position [and] we're going to experience 10 ? 15,000 residents in Aurora within the next 10 to 15 years,' said Mayor Dawe. 'Any time I have been in business where I was involved in a hiring freeze or a hiring reduction, it was because business was not growing, not because of growth.'

'I suspect everyone here as well gets complaints about taxes. I get complaints that things don't get done fast enough.'

Instead of a hiring freeze, Mayor Dawe said he was in favour of the second clause in Councillor Mrakas' motion, namely the vacancy control program. This too was the way forward for Councillor Michael Thompson, who noted if it didn't address the issues around the table, a hiring freeze could be revisited when it comes to budget deliberations.

That being said, there were other supporters for a freeze around the table. While Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was in favour of a hiring freeze in principle, now was not the right time as there were still hires already examined by Council that would address current services.

'In my business world, it is very common to have a hiring freeze and that comes out of low revenues, high expenses and not meeting targets,' added Councillor Sandra Humfries. 'It sends a message that I manage what I have to work with [in] my peer groups and see if there is anything to do differently. I think it forces the team [to] look at how we need to work to deliver those exceptional service levels. It happens all the time. Eventually we start meeting our targets and it is lifted. It generates an opportunity to think a little bit differently.'