

Aurora 150 finance motion would have negative impact on volunteers: Council

By Brock Weir

If you're going to focus on one citizen committee, you should focus on them all.

That was the argument made by many members of Council this month as they rejected a bid from Councillor Wendy Gaertner 6 ? 2 to have a new staff report detailing all expenses incurred in the planning of Aurora's 150th anniversary celebration last year.

In her motion, Councillor Wendy Gaertner called on a further staff report to compile all the numbers previously reported to Council in the form of a ledger, in the interest of ?transparency and accountability.?

?We have had the Committee come forward at the podium and give us some excellent and quite detailed updates, but we haven't had a staff report and I believe we need a staff report,? she said. ?I think that is being transparent with the public funds. I am not sure that any committee of Council has ever worked harder than the 150th Committee, and they did an excellent job. There is no intent to disparage them at all.?

Although she added a report crunching the numbers would be easier for the public to understand, and said a resident came to her citing some difficulty in obtaining the numbers himself, some Councillors did not buy the argument the motion did not ?disparage? the committee.

When the motion was first discussed at the final Council meeting in June, several members spoke out against the motion suggesting it implied ?transparency and accountability? was not there. This was a continued theme when they took a second kick at the motion this month.

?It may not be your intent to cast any aspersions on the Committee that did this work, but it certainly is the effect of it,? argued Councillor Evelyn Buck, noting she found the process where the Town Treasurer and the Director of Parks and Recreation signing off on each budget item ?completely open and transparent.?

A similar view was put forward by Councillor Sandra Humfries who said she had no problems producing the numbers for a resident when they asked for them. Going a step further, she said if one Committee was the subject of a motion like that it might make residents ?wary? of joining a citizen committee.

?I think it was one of the best committees that gave so much,? said Councillor Humfries. ?I can't even fathom the return on investment Aurora received for having those amount of hours and output without having to pay [for] those resources. They did a great job, I know Councillor Gaertner recognizes that as well, but the intent of this motion, for me, is not necessary. We have the information.?

Councillor Paul Pirri, on the other hand, went a step further. As the information Councillor Gaertner was requesting was already in the public realm, he said couldn't see the motion as ?anything but an attack? on the Committee. This view was backed up by Councillor Michael Thompson who questioned the timing of the motion since the Aurora 150 celebrations were wrapped up last fall.

?I do think it casts a disparaging light on those people who have their time and their effort to put this forward, and it also sheds an unfortunate light on a wonderful project that helped create and build up some civic pride within Aurora.?

From the perspective of Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, the Aurora 150 Committee was one of the most ?open committees? he had seen, meetings which were always open to the public. If Councillor Gaertner had ?taken advantage of the meetings? she would have a ?better sense of how this Committee was run, how the process occurred, how the money was spent, the amount of discussion around the table as to how they were going to spend that money, and if they were getting value for the money.?

?If we want this kind of report from the Committee, we should want it from every committee and every dollar that is spent through Town,? he said. ?If you want to bring that forward, that way we can offend every member of the Committee and not just the 150 group.?

Near the end of the discussion, although she did not support the motion, Councillor Buck proved to be an unlikely ally of Councillor Gaertner, becoming frustrated that other Councillors might have been piling on. It was a motion duly seconded by a Councillor, argued Councillor Buck, and Councillor Gaertner did ?not deserve to be criticized for putting forward a resolution. If we don't agree with it, we should turn it down, otherwise we should stop throwing bricks at a Councillor.?

In turn, Councillor Gaertner said she ?took offence? at some of the comments around the table, continuing the argument it was all about accountability.

?This has nothing to do with other committees, or historical stuff, this was something special and we decided we would spend a special amount of money to celebrate and that money belongs to the public,? she concluded. ?If one member of the public had trouble?getting the information, I just don't think that makes sense. That is public information.?

She was supported in her motion by Councillor John Gallo.