

Aurora needs to know where communications are falling short, says Council

By Brock Weir

Nearly two-thirds of residents surveyed say they are largely satisfied with the way the Town of Aurora is communicating with them but, for many Councillors, the larger question is why they're falling short of the mark with the balance.

Council considered a report from Michael Kemp, Aurora's Manager of Corporate Communications last week which indicated a general satisfaction with how Aurora's message is getting out to the community. In a survey of 110 residents carried out by students from York University's Schulich School of Business, just about two thirds of residents indicated they were content with the status quo, with the Town's website and local newspapers, receiving the most frequent hits.

The survey was largely carried out with intercept interviews at municipal facilities, over the phone, with additional surveying being carried out by municipal staff at the Town of Aurora's booth at last month's Aurora Street Festival.

But the report contained a significant gap, according to Councillors, in not delving into why one third of the community believes Aurora is missing the mark and questioned the methodology behind the findings.

"When I was on the Library Board we did a strategic review and we did surveys as well," recalled Councillor Michael Thompson. "One of the things we were very interested in was that percentage of people who didn't use the library. It [was] the segment of the population that didn't use the Library that we were really trying to understand. What is it we weren't doing? When I look at this report and the findings, I am more concerned with the one third that didn't. Why?"

"When you're doing these kinds of surveys you're trying to dig in and understand why they don't feel the website or how the communication is working. You look at these failings as opportunities to learn and to address the issue. Always talking to people who are using our facilities, you're preaching to the converted."

This past spring, Council approved a public workshop to discuss future communications strategies and, for Councillor Thompson, it is important to emphasise Council wants the public to participate and highlight where they are hitting and missing the mark.

"We are fortunate to have a number of people who are very much actively involved in communications and different things and have unique perspectives [that] can add value to the conversation. Then we can ultimately do a better job. It ultimately goes back to the same conversation we have every time we start the budget: that accountability framework. Are we doing the right things? That is what this is all about."

Councillor Paul Pirri said he too was concerned with the stats in the report. Only 110 people were reached in the survey, and that is not enough for a community of over 60,000 people.

"I would be concerned about moving forward and developing a policy and having a policy based around us having spoken to 110 people," said Councillor Pirri, underscoring the general population.

According to Mayor Geoff Dawe, however, there was an opportunity missed when Council signed off on setting out to find out these answers.

Recommendations before Council initially called on outsourcing this survey to a professional company, but Council ultimately opted to take the matter in-house.

"This Council turned down going out for a professional survey," said Mayor Dawe. "There is one way to get your data and that is you go out and ask for it. We have to be conscious of both sides of the argument."

While Mayor Dawe said Councillor Pirri's arguments were 'extremely valid', the Mayor's response was questioned by Councillor Thompson who said he was either 'inferring staff are incapable of conducting a survey or the only way to get good data is to pay for it.' Mayor Dawe, on the other hand, said his intent was not to 'insult anyone at this table' but going to an outside firm to conduct the survey, a company that does this type of thing on a regular basis, would have provided 'the most solvent data.'