

Aurora should set an example on accessible buildings: Committee

By Brock Weir

Should all public buildings and spaces meet the requirements of accessibility legislation in Ontario, or should Aurora go the extra mile?

That was the question considered by Councillors at the Committee level last week over the planned new Joint Operations Centre on Industrial Parkway North, with Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee suggesting this should be an example for the entire community on new builds.

Some Councillors, however, had pause on the vagueness of the word and potential costs that could come with it.

Are we going to make sure all buildings exceed that which is the norm, and be innovative and a leader in terms of all other municipalities? asked Councillor Michael Thompson. Being an example means everyone looks to us and we are an example of best practices.

What I am inferring from this is, regardless of costs, we should be at an elevated level [of accessibility] more so than everyone else and be that example. I'm not sure what the committee means. Is there some prudence along the way as well? Every space needs to be accessible and barrier free, but there needs to be some costs associated with it.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, vice chair of the Accessibility committee, said it is their hope the Town of Aurora will be a best practice community that other communities can look at.

When these spaces are configured, we want them to be barrier free. I don't think it is an extra cost, I think it is an extra attention to detail.

Others, however, echoed Councillor Thompson's concerns, including Mayor Geoffrey Dawe who said the recommendation implies we're setting the bar pretty high and this leaves the door propped for open-ended spending. Councillor Gaertner rejected that idea, but said if things are done at the beginning of the project, any costs would be negligible to the overall scope of the project.

Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Building, agreed planning for accessible space at the outset certainly reduces costs.

As part of the building permit process, we do a review for barrier free design to ensure it meets all the requirements of the building code, said Ms. van Leeuwen. Those include entrances, hallway widths, accessible washrooms, ensuring there is accommodations for people who might be disabled, including workspaces. It is things like the height of your light switches, counters, accommodating swinging doors, so someone in a wheelchair can wheel up to a door and have some clearances.

Nevertheless, part of the problem is there are some exemptions to accessibility requirements within the building code, she added, noting a new building code coming forward this January would include additional accessibility requirements.

This is simply good planning and it behoves the municipality to set a good example for builders and other businesses in Town, said Councillor Chris Ballard. If we're not doing it right, we can't expect anyone else to be held accountable and to do it right. I see no ambiguity in the recommendation whatsoever. It just sets out what is common sense and what the building calls for.

The discussions, however, did not dissuade Councillor Thompson from his original concerns.

I hate to bring this back, but let's look at Council chambers and our discussions for accessibility in this chamber, he said. We had a number of different options. All have different costs, if we're going to set an example to make this chamber accessible, it is a significant renovation, it is a significant cost.

?I think we should be cautious [with] that term. It doesn't mean meet the standards, as outlined by the building code. It means to exceed it and it is open to interpretation. There is a cost associated with it and we only have to look back to the discussion around the Council chambers.?