

Aurora to tighten communications after Cell Tower issue

By Brock Weir

Communication errors were made, helping pave the way for the controversial cell phone tower in King that caused protests among adjacent Aurora neighbours, according to municipal staff.

That is the message due before Councillors this week from Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. Mr. Ramunno's report responds to calls made by Council in April to review how the Town's management handled Bell Canada's application for the tower and why they simply responded 'no comment' to Bell Canada seeking input on the proposal.

In his report, Mr. Ramunno says the Town of Aurora received an email from consultants on behalf of Bell on May 11, 2012, outlining Bell's proposals for the Bathurst Street tower. Four days later, however, a planner within his department acknowledged the email by stating Aurora had 'no comment' on the proposal.

'This email response was not sent by the Department Head and should not have been considered as a final comment,' said Mr. Ramunno. 'Official comments sent on behalf of the Town in response to a request for comments happen under the signature of the Manager or Director. The email sent did not conform to the practice and should not have been considered a formal response from the Town. However, the receiver was not aware of this and took the comment as a formal response.'

'It should be noted that Bell has stated that it was not asking nor interested in comments on the matter from the Town as this was a matter for King Township to deal with.'

Mr. Ramunno's report details what transpired since the initial communication from Bell's consultants - including a public consultation session which eventually took place after a false start and low attendance - up to the fracas this past April where several upset Aurora neighbours bordering Bathurst Street, just north of Henderson Drive, came forward to express their concerns about the tower looming over their back yards.

As a result, Mr. Ramunno has recommended more stringent rules in how these matters will be handled in the future.

'As a result of the 'no comment' email sent by one of the Planning staff on this matter, the director has provided clear direction to planning staff that any formal comment from the Department on such sensitive matters are to be sent via letter and should be authored and co-signed by the director,' says Mr. Ramunno. 'The Town's current protocol requires a letter from the Director of Planning Services will be provided to the proponent and Industry Canada stating any comments or concerns, if any, to the proposed tower.'

'In response to the differences in the public consultation process followed by other municipalities, future applications for telecommunication towers from adjacent municipalities or within Aurora's boundaries will be presented to Aurora Council via the report from the planning department with a formal recommendation of Council. The report will indicate the consultation process that was followed and comments from the Town and residents on the proposed Tower.'

Regardless of what happens internally at Town Hall with these matters, more needs to be done to reach out to people within the community who might be affected by the tower proposals in question, Mr. Ramunno concludes. He notes that King's protocol in these situations requires them to host public information sessions to residents living within 250 metres of the proposed site. Only 10 Aurora property owners were 'allegedly' notified of King's meeting, Mr. Ramunno says.

Aurora should work with King to draft mutually beneficial - and complementary - rules to govern residential notification and cell towers.

In early May, following a motion from King Councillor Peter Grandilli, their municipal staff were requested 'to work collaboratively with the Town of Aurora staff to draft a resolution and protocol to ultimately be forwarded to Industry Canada, addressing mutual concerns and impacts from communication tower installations within both municipalities.'

Further suggested changes to the process coming from a report from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities up for Councillors' consideration at the committee level this week include written notice being more obvious to residents, including literally spelling out the purpose of the letter directly on the envelope, to ensure that such letters are not mistaken for junk mail.