

Changes in communication promised following JOC audit

By Brock Weir

Improved communication is one of the key ?lessons learned? in a full audit of the multimillion dollar Joint Operations Centre project, according to municipal staff.

Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny responded to a number of concerns outlined by elected officials last week after a full audit of the Joint Operations Centre, home to the Town's departments of Parks and Public Works, found the project was over \$450,000 over budget so far, and would require a further \$1.8 million to complete.

As The Auroran reported last week, the audit criticises a number of shortcomings in how the project was handled, particularly the lack of proper management.

A formal Project Manager was not brought onto the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) file until midway through the construction, the report notes, and numerous items necessary to complete the JOC were taken out of the project to make it appear the building was staying within the set budget.

?It was identified through the auditor that the project was mismanaged, lacked the effective leadership to bring it to proper completion that would be under-budget, but I am confident moving forward that our CAO is going to be implementing those necessary changes and make sure that any project in the future is going to have the proper project management in place,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas at last Tuesday's Council meeting. ?I am also confident in the Town that we will have the effective leadership needed for future projects.?

Future safeguards were also the focus of Councillor Michael Thompson, who pressed Mr. Nadorozny for lessons that can be brought out of the JOC project that might be applicable to builds and other municipal projects down the line.

?There are lessons at the general level beyond the simple requirement for good project management techniques,? said Mr. Nadorozny. ?A lot of the things that quickly fall out of the process are also part of good project management. I think we have to do a better job communicating the status of these projects in a clearer way. One of the things the auditor found is that most of things in some way at some time were reported but the way they were reported and the frequency they were reported left gaps in the understanding Council and the community would have had as to where the project really was.

?Between communication and financial monitoring I think those are two key things that even without [a] rigorous project management system we would certainly want to make some big changes in just how we manage the project just from a financial and communications perspective. But, as I said, all of those things are part of a robust project management strategy which we are also developing.?

This ?rigour,? however, is something that Councillor Thompson said needs to be applied no matter what project, big or small, happens to be on the table.

?I hope we would do the same thing to ensure taxpayer money is looked after,? he said.

Communication was also an issue from the perspective of Councillor Harold Kim.

More fulsome minutes from meetings of Aurora's Financial Advisory Committee (FAC) and the Financial Monitoring Task Force, the latter of which was instituted to keep an eye on the JOC project, would have been key in helping Council follow the financial ball, he suggested.

?There are meeting minutes that are attached to it, but what comes to Council is also editorial notes in terms of some of the comments we made at the FAC and we haven't seen that when the monitoring task force was on it,? said Councillor Kim. ?I think from a process perspective, we need to have some more detailed notes and meeting minutes. Any kind of committee that is tasked to do anything, we need to have someone to make good meeting minutes.?

This might prove more difficult than it seems on the purpose. According to Town Clerk Michael de Rond, both the Municipal Act and the Town's Procedural Bylaw prohibit minutes with any note or comment. There might be some leeway with a less formal task force, but it could take some work.

Asked by Councillor Mrakas on what procedures can be put in place to ensure that items aren't removed from future builds to artificially deflate costs, Mr. Nadorozny said the reality of large projects is such that decisions are made throughout its course that could result in removing something from the big picture.

?I don't want to say that we'll design a system to ensure that never happens,? said Mr. Nadorozny. ?Sometimes those are good decisions, made as a result of the contractors and other consultants involved, that come up with an alternative way to design that area or some shortcuts they can make to save some money, so they take something out. One of the things the audit noted was that from

the time the building was designed to the time it was being built, our methods and materials we used for winter control changed and we could have lowered the roof.

?You want to have a system that can compensate for those kinds of things, even though the project is started and maybe a different outcome is anticipated. I think what's different about this one and where I would like to have systems in place is to make sure the order of the magnitude of those changes is not materially changing the functionality of what was envisioned when the project started. That is the role of the project management team, a well scoped project and a project manager to ensure at the end of the day that services that were to be delivered as a result of that asset being built can in fact be built.?

Concluding the discussion, Mayor Geoff Dawe said the comments made around the table were ?well taken.?

?It is unfortunate that we did not have the project management group in place first in terms of capital delivery,? he said. ?I think that perhaps working in conjunction with the Region [we can] see how they do their capital delivery management. They are very good at it and do some pretty substantial projects [and we can see] what we can learn from them. We do a number of capital delivery projects now that are handled regularly and done very well. It is a case of scope, a case of scale and a case of us understanding those differences and looking at what needs to be done up front as opposed to after the fact.?