

Citizen survey on municipal programs could be delayed

How are we doing? That is a question many Aurora residents might like to answer if it is posed to them by Town Hall. But if you're looking to engage, you might have to wait a bit longer.

This year, the Town of Aurora was poised to launch a citizen survey, the results of which could serve to inform and guide the decision-making process not only around the Council table but in delivery of municipal services.

Such surveys, according to the Town, are a best practice seen in other municipalities to give residents a chance to sound off on their satisfaction with Town operations on a regular basis, but one has not been done in Aurora since 2004.

The global pandemic, however, may force this survey to be postponed until 2022 to give pollsters a chance to engage with residents face to face.

“The purpose of the resident survey is to better understand the needs and perceptions of residents; determine satisfaction with municipal services, programs and events; identify areas of concern; better understand awareness of municipal services, programs and events, and identify communication preferences of residents,” said Eliza Bennett, Interim Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town. “This survey will enable the municipality to gather data on a wide range of benchmark questions as a tool to inform future priorities for Council and administration. A citizen satisfaction survey generally seeks to better understand: issues that are most important to residents; residents' opinions about their quality of life; residents' opinions about municipal services and programs; and residents' general sense of the future of their community.

“In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some municipalities are choosing to postpone citizen satisfaction surveys originally scheduled for 2020 or 2021. Some municipalities have either already proceeded with, or plan to proceed with, their scheduled survey, although in at least one case the survey was delayed for six months in the start of the pandemic.”

Due to ongoing health concerns, staff are recommending to Council that carrying out the citizen survey be delayed until the first half of 2022 as most municipal programs and services are either not running or running in a modified way. It would, it is argued, better reflect residents' opinions on “normal” operations and “residents are likely to feel differently about their quality of life as a result of the pandemic.”

But this reason to delay was cited by Councillor John Gallo as a reason to forge ahead as planned with a survey this year.

“I am just trying to think maybe outside the box that, yes, all of the things that are mentioned in terms of why we maybe shouldn't do it now are true, but is there any other value we can gather in this unique situation that we wouldn't normally?” he asked. “I am leaning towards doing it now. I think there would be some information and hopefully we would never get it again but it would be useful. I hope we are never in this situation again, but we may be learning something because we're all in the middle of this situation.”

Similar viewpoints were offered by Councillors Sandra Humfries and Rachel Gilliland.

“We might get some surprising comments, some negative and some very positive in terms of what we have been able to deliver during these difficult times,” said Councillor Humfries.

Councillor Gilliland said she agreed that carrying the survey out now when most people are at home, might get more “engaged” feedback.

“It might never be normal again. Normal might be how we have been running some events virtually and I know a lot of organizations have been reaching out to the community to get feedback on the delivery of some of these programs already,” she said.

Voting against the recommendations were Councillors Michael Thompson and Wendy Gaertner. Although they did not oppose carrying out a survey in and of itself, they objected to such a survey, when it ultimately comes to pass, being carried out by a consultant to the tune of \$30,000.

‘I am still of the opinion that I would rather us take it on ourselves and engage residents through kiosks and other ways to get them to fill out the survey,’ said Councillor Thompson. ‘Too often we come back to these circular pieces around communicating with our residents and it seems to be a bit of an ongoing conversation about how best to do it. I continue to advocate: why don't we bring it to the people, whether through festivals, events or to our facilities? Yet it always seems we want them to come to us or we hire consultants.’

This was a view shared by Councillor Harold Kim who, although he voted in favour of the recommendation, cited some lacklustre results from previous efforts to engage residents.

‘People complain about their taxes and budget all the time, but in our Citizen Budget we [barely] got a dozen people at most,’ said Councillor Kim. ‘I am doubtful how much resident buy-in the consultant will receive to make it worthwhile to spend \$30,000.’

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter