

Committee consolidation leads to questions on community input

By Brock Weir

The possible amalgamation of Aurora's Parks & Recreation, Environment and Trails Committees into one citizen advisory committee with a broad mandate has led to some Council members questioning community input.

Council is poised to approve a recommendation this week that will see the establishment of five committees that will serve Aurora over the next four years: A Finance Advisory Committee that will be comprised of just Council members, as well as a Governance Review Ad-Hoc Committee, Heritage Advisory Committee, Community Recognition Review Advisory Committee and a Community Services Advisory Committee, each of which will have Council members and members of the public alike as members. But it was the establishment of the Community Services Advisory Committee that generated the most discussion last Tuesday at the first General Committee meeting of the new Council term.

The proposed committee structure would resemble the previous term with the exception of consolidating the Parks, Recreation & Cultural Services Committee, Environmental Advisory Committee, and the Trails & Active Transportation Advisory Committee, said Town Clerk Mike de Rond in his report to Council, adding that more efficiency can be achieved by merging the groups.

The Legislative Services division experienced multiple occasions where meetings were cancelled from these three committees due to lack of agenda items. Doing this would help ensure more substance and substantial discussions at the meetings.

This viewpoint was backed by Councillor Michael Thompson who said this was often the case with the citizen advisory committee he chaired in the last term.

As Chair of Parks & Rec, we struggled last term [with] having enough issues we felt really warranted the volunteers' time, energy and input and giving them enough to digest, said Councillor Thompson. I like the idea of combining things so that they are not wasting their time. I am okay with moving forward on it. If other members of Council wanted to increase participation, I would be okay with that.

One such Council member who saw things differently was Councillor John Gallo, who said that each of the previously established committees had five members apiece; now, should the Community Services committee go forward, just five community members would serve overall.

We're reducing community involvement by about 10 people, and I am just wondering if we can put a little more thought into those, said Councillor Gallo. I can certainly see Trails and Parks & Rec together [but] to me Environmental should be on its own. I have some issues, and maybe I am okay with trying it and seeing how it goes, but at first blush, to remove that amount of residents...I ran on a platform of more engagement, not less engagement, from the public and I get the feeling that that is what this is doing.

Mayor Mrakas, on the other hand, struck a middle of the road approach. He said while he would like to see the amalgamated committee move forward and try it out, he was not adverse to making changes if it doesn't work.

I do definitely agree that I would like to see an increase in the number of citizen members, said Mayor Mrakas. I don't think five is enough; I wouldn't mind going with nine. I think that brings us to a more reasonable number and I think it would also give us enough citizen members there that we could possibly be able to have a certain number from each field of expertise and make up that committee. I think nine would be a good number to move forward with.

Councillors, particularly Councillor Gallo, also raised issue with an extra step that will now be in the Committee process where recommendations from each advisory committee would be vetted by senior staff to decide whether they should proceed to Council for action or whether they would benefit from a further staff report to allow Council members to make a more informed decision. Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny told Council that this was intended to avoid confusion that has cropped up in the past where minutes would be passed at Council and there was an expectation from Committee members that gears would start turning on their recommendations. In other cases, such as a committee recommendation to build a new gymnasium at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, there was ambiguity over next steps.

We had other occasions where, quite frankly, something came up from committee, it was passed and was being done, said Mr. Nadorozny. There was not really an opportunity, unless Council point blank asked a question, some of the things went by without even a staff comment and we maybe had concerns about implementation and what the ramifications were.