

Community radio station receives tentative green light ? with significantly smaller price tag

By Brock Weir

A new radio station based out of the Aurora Family Leisure Complex to be run by ? and serve ? the community took a significant step forward at Council last week.

Council gave a tentative green light to ?Radio Aurora?, a new community station earmarked for 101.5 FM with the call letters CHRA, last week. While an agreement between the Town and the organization behind the radio station will still need to come before Council, they approved a \$10,000 budget increase funded from reserves to renovate a space at the Complex (AFLC) with carpet and electricity to serve as the station's base.

Going into last week's meeting, however, Councillors were facing a staff recommendation to increase the budget not to \$10,000 but by a significantly larger \$250,000 to create a recording studio complete with sound-proofing. This recommendation was made in error, according to Mayor Dawe.

?I have had discussions with [Ferguson Mobbs, the leading proponent behind the radio project] going back a year or longer and certainly one of the points that came up right at the start of the discussion was while I thought this was a great idea, I also didn't think it should be costing the Town of Aurora any money,? said Mayor Dawe. ?When I saw the report come out last week, I was kind of surprised by the amount, so I spoke with Mr. Mobbs last week, but there has been a bit of a communications gap in terms of what was expected from the Town and what got interpreted back to [department directors]. Really what they are looking for is some space.?

But, it was this space which spurred significant discussion around the Council table. While Council was uniformly enthusiastic about the idea of having an Aurora-based radio station, particularly one set to be community-based, the idea received some hesitation from Councillors Tom Mrakas and Wendy Gaertner. In his arguments, Councillor Mrakas said it was a ?great idea? but not having a business plan for the station before them gave him some pause.

?That is something I would like to see because [this report] identifies no staff or operating costs are contemplated at this time,? he said. ?I understand the radio station is saying they are going to be self-sufficient, but unfortunately with all due respect to the Aurora Cultural Centre ? I love them and what they're doing ? we have done this before. Council has heard before that a place is going to be self-sufficient. They ask for some money up front and the Town is on the hook on a yearly basis for money.?

Councillors Mrakas and Gaertner were ultimately the two lone votes against the proposal, but Councillor Gaertner's objections came from a different corner. Information before Council, she said, did not give any indication on any lost income opportunity for the Town in being able to use this space either for its own programming or to rent it out.

?The Town is growing,? she said. ?I don't know if we're going to have another community centre ? perhaps, hopefully ? but in the meantime this is going to be space we won't be able to use for our own programming.?

Nothing is lost, however, because it is space that is not used right now, countered Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation.

For those Council members voting in favour of the proposal, their support came not just from their support of the ?Voice of Aurora? overall, but in their view this was ultimately an investment. Eventually, they said, the room in question would need to be carpeted and wired. Not being able to provide the station's proponents with a fixed location for their operations would hinder their ability to go forward and seek grant funding and finish other components of what they need to do.

?There aren't any operating costs unless we're going to count vacuuming the space,? said Councillor Paul Pirri. ?I don't disagree that

an operations plan makes sense once we get into that process, but we have been told they are operating strictly on a volunteer basis and really, at this time, we're just putting in renovations to enable them to go out and fundraise, and to install the equipment to do what they have to do in order to get this up and running.?

Added Councillor John Abel: ?We're all about risk and cost and from what I am understanding at the moment, we're going to put electricity and some flooring in this room. I don't see a risk at all. We're not paying for DJs or technicians, so I don't see why we need a business plan for operations. After a year of operation, we might see that there is something we weren't aware of, but I can't imagine what it is. The benefit is what I look at. This is a tremendous opportunity for us at no risk and no cost.?