

"Comprehensive report" will address JOC budget issues: Mayor

By Brock Weir

A comprehensive report from Aurora's CAO will address lingering concerns over the final costs of the Town's new Joint Operations Centre, according to Mayor Geoff Dawe.

The Mayor made his comments in his annual interview with The Auroran ahead of his yearly address to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce on February 15.

In his interview (See Page 7 of this week's Auroran), Mayor Dawe cited two items as particular hallmarks of the last 12 months of Council, one he said, was a positive and one which might be seen in a slightly less positive light.

The first, he said, was the settlement reached in the redevelopment of the former Highland Gate golf course.

It is not a popular decision in Town, but I highlight it because of what we did not go through, which is a long, messy hearing that would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars for probably no benefit to the Town, said Mayor Dawe. I understand it was not a popular decision, but the reality is that all of us (Council), because we're elected at large, are required to make decisions that benefit the entire Town.

Would it benefit the entire Town to spend upwards of \$1 million that probably would not get what most people wanted? It is not one of those really popular decisions, but it is part of what we have to do.

A more positive item, he said, was the completion of Aurora's new Joint Operations Centre (JOC) at the head of Industrial Parkway. Completed last year as the combined new home of the Departments of Parks and Public Works, it is a state-of-the-art building that boasts many environmentally friendly features and space to address the needs of a growing municipality.

The JOC, however, has not been without its fair share of controversy.

Since January, the final budget for the facility has been under the increased scrutiny of Council as some members have questioned just what the final costs of the building are.

In a recent blog post, Councillor Tom Mrakas reiterated some of his comments made around the Council table last month.

Once again, Council was asked to review new budget numbers and added capital items for the project, he wrote. I can't help but notice that costs keep being added after the project is said to have been completed. I have made the point repeatedly that capital projects cannot continue to be managed in this fashion. Getting one price and thinking that's it, but then finding out afterwards that there are many other items that are added in after the fact that add to the overall costs of a facility pretty substantially. Certainly in the case of the JOC where these 'added costs' are now close to a million dollars, I believe the Financial Task Force who monitor and examine all the financial and budgetary aspects related to the delivery of this project should provide an explanation as to why so many components were removed to meet the budget targets.

To address these concerns, Mayor Dawe said CAO Doug Nadorozny is preparing a very comprehensive report on the matter, but said everything has come before Council up to this point. There shouldn't be any surprises.

Nevertheless, a different approach would have been taken to the project in hindsight, he said.

As soon as we ran into a soils issue, which was a big challenge, although we still ended up with a land cost that would have been less if it were at the 404, we should have highlighted that at that point and re-looked at the budget to say we have had this increase, we're going to run into our contingency, this is not a good way to use our contingency, and at least have had the discussion back then on if we should increase our budget by x-amount, said Mayor Dawe. Contingencies are there to cover things you may not have thought of in the building.

This is in hindsight, of course, but I don't think contingencies were a good place to look at covering the mitigation costs for the soil conditions.

If they had to do it all over again, Mayor Dawe said he would have liked the budget presented all-in rather than having to whittle it down piecemeal.

We can say next time we'll do it differently, but the reality is it is probably going to be a while before we have a next time, another substantial facility, he said. We would do it differently, I don't think there is any question about that. We should have had a third party project manager from the start, because they are very complicated projects. For example, the Region of York has an extremely good capital delivery program handled internally, but they are doing capital delivery projects all the time. We don't, and it is a very unique skillset, there's no question.

The project manager brought on midstream, however, did save Aurora time and money, he contended.

The next capital project on the horizon is a new recreation centre, which is part of Aurora's 10-year capital plan.

There is no fixed timeline as to when this might move forward for further consideration.