

Council keeps the door open for future accessibility renos

By Brock Weir

Town Hall will keep the Council chamber as it is for now, while looking for ways to improve accessibility in the future.

Aurora Councillors voted last week to keep the status quo when it comes to accessibility for people using mobility devices in the Council chambers. The chamber, currently serviced by two ramps leading down on the floor, has been the subject of much discussion recently on how to make things easier for people using these devices, including larger scooters and electric wheelchairs.

Potential problems include the slope and dimensions of the existing ramp.

A number of solutions to rectify potential problems have been examined, including the possibility of spending over \$100,000 to raise the floor by one foot to improve ramps, and the installation of lifts.

The chamber was evaluated by architects and accessibility experts, including March of Dimes Canada, to look at ways to help the situation. They recommended some minor temporary measures, such as carpentry work, but further changes would, according to reports before Councillors, have a financial impact on the town but provide only "moderate" results. Such options included raising the floor to remove the bottom "flight" of the ramps at a cost of \$112,000, installing a stair lift for \$45,000, and a platform lift at \$72,000.

Keeping the status quo, however, was something which rankled Councillor Wendy Gaertner, a member of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee. She said she was concerned with "no apparent solution" being put on the table.

"This is the final step in a process to find best options to provide dignity and barrier-free access to this public chamber," she said. "Our mandated Accessibility Advisory Committee found that none of the remediated options meet the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Our own staff report concludes by investing in the infrastructure of the Council chambers, the Town of Aurora would be allowing people with disabilities the same opportunity to access while respecting the core principles of independence, dignity and integration and equal opportunity.

"I believe that this Council has a duty to respectfully accommodate everyone in this chamber. Allowing the status quo is neither right, nor fair."

Supporting Councillor Gaertner's argument was Councillor Chris Ballard. He said it is important to have everyone in Aurora able to easily access the floor of the Council chamber, whether they are a member of the public, staff, or a current or future member of Council.

"I don't think it is good enough that we are able to hand them a microphone and sit at the top," he said. "I don't think it is good that it is going to take a fair bit of work for someone with a mobility issue to come down one of these ramps. I don't think that is fair and I don't think that lends to the dignity of this Council."

That being said, however, he added he always had concerns about the costs of how to make this a reality and suggested looking at alternatives to make things easier. This was the general thrust around Council, but there were some disagreements on how to actually get to that point.

"None of the options provided a real solution that met the needs of everybody that qualified under the conditions of the AODA," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "Really the intent of endorsing the status quo is to say we'll endorse these temporary measures. It will do for a moment and [we will] continue to look for solutions and continue explorations.

"By endorsing the status quo, I didn't hear anybody saying the issue was over with, we were forgetting about it and moving on. We were just saying, based on the advice of the accessibility committee, no single option endorsed all of these issues. We need to keep

exploring.?

This echoed comments made earlier in the evening by Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who eventually put forward motions along with Councillor Gallo, formalizing continuing to look for solutions.

?I want some consideration for the 2014 or 2015 budget to take a look at Town Hall renovations and have that included in the accessibility of the chamber,? she said. ?It's something we can look forward to and be proud of for the duration of this building. This is not something that should stop here.?

Nevertheless, while Councillors voted to keep things as they are but leaving the door open to the future, Councillor Gaertner was adamant that something needed to be done, and now was the time to do it.

?We need to do what is right and what is fair. If it costs money, it costs money. I can't think of a better way to spend money than to make this very important seat of government truly accessible to everybody,? she said.