

Council questions value of LEED as JOC nears a tarnished Gold

By Brock Weir

Does Aurora really need LEED certification to demonstrate its 'green' credentials with the new Joint Operations Centre?

That's the question on the minds of some Councillors after continued efforts to secure LEED Gold status on the future home of Aurora's Parks and Recreation Department and Department of Public Works have come under increased scrutiny.

In 2013, Council approved building the Joint Operations Centre to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certified Gold, certification monitored by the Canada Green Building Council evaluating projects based on sustainability, energy efficiency, and other 'green' criteria.

Despite shelling out extra money to achieve this, however, Council learned last month that their efforts had fallen short, leading to a number of questions around the table.

These questions continued last week after Councillors were presented with a further staff report from Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, detailing how and why Aurora stumbled on the way to the Gold podium.

'As the building design neared completion in late 2013, the project team was seeing that LEED Gold was becoming more difficult to achieve but that sufficient points were still available through administrative type activities if needed,' said Mr. Simanovskis.

As the construction progressed, the game changed and the number of hurdles needing to be cleared increased, according to Mr. Simanovskis, and the balance of points might be achieved through access to public transportation 'which is up to York Region Transit, water use reduction, securing green power (not being considered, he noted), and innovation in design. Additional possibilities include solar panel projects.

Council members, however, were not satisfied with where things stand.

'It is important to note that whether or not we hit LEED Gold, the building will still be as efficient,' said Mayor Geoff Dawe. 'There are items in the whole concept of LEED that I don't particularly agree with, to be frank. One of them is what kind of bus route we are on. [I don't] see how that changes how our building will operate.'

While Councillor Paul Pirri said he 'liked' the concept of LEED, he was not a fan of all the red tape a municipality has to clear to get there.

'In future, the next time we do a build, I don't want us to achieve LEED, I want us to build a green building,' said Councillor Pirri. 'For the same reason in the past that I was against Bullfrog Power, I didn't see the value in it because I saw it more as a marketing tool than a green initiative. LEED, in my opinion, is more of a marketing tool than it is an indication of your commitment to sustainable and green buildings.'

'We're down this road now, I am not thrilled we are down this road, but in the future, I don't think we should be going after LEED, but we should be building to LEED standard.'

Whatever point in the road they are on, however, there is still no guarantee Aurora will reach its ultimate destination. Following questions from Councillor Tom Mrakas, Mr. Simanovskis pointed out that the building is well within the range for Silver certification, but there is no guarantee with the Gold.

'We were always aware [upping the fees to achieve Gold] would be a possibility if we didn't get that threshold,' he said. 'Here we are at the end of the project and the consultant has recognized there are a few points that needed to put us in the right range.'

This, on the other hand, did not wash with Councillor Michael Thompson, who led the concerns on the Gold shortfall last month, this time turning attention away from the LEED program to staff reporting back to Council on all the information needed to look at this shortfall.

?When I look back on the reports that we had previously, the language in those reports with regards to the JOC and any conversations we had around LEED programs is significantly different from the language in the report today,? he said. ?The language in the report today talks about pursuing goals and targets and hopefully we can make it, but there was no uncertainty in any of the prior reports that we had. The prior reports talked about the building was approved for Gold, we paid money for Gold, that we marketed it. We had lots of material we went out and marketed and said this building will be Gold standard. There was no uncertainty in the language and that is the challenge I have.

?We made decisions based on the fact it will be Gold. Even in the report [now] one of the motions was specific to the fact we have asked staff to come back with a report on the implications of going for Gold standard. Nowhere in that was any sort of conversation or information about there being a risk or a challenge in getting it and all that stuff is finally coming out and it speaks to the integrity of the reports we get.?