

Council retains tighter grip on purchasing power

By Brock Weir

Councillors want to keep a closer eye on how public money is spent, following proposed changes to Aurora's purchasing policies.

Recommendations set out last Tuesday on revisions to the Town's guideline proposed bumping up the threshold staff and departments can spend on previously budgeted items without having to come back to Council for further approval.

As it stands going into this week's Council meeting, staff must come back with a report to Councillors authorising them to spend anything more than \$50,000. Staff recommended increasing this to a \$200,000 limit, but Council opted to slash this in half.

“An increase in the threshold would reduce the time required to award a contract which would provide a better service level to vendors and proponents,” said Town Clerk John Leach. “It would also enable the Town to respond more quickly to market conditions and be consistent with the threshold amounts in neighbouring municipalities.”

While Aurora stands at \$50,000, Newmarket's limit is capped at \$250,000 with Richmond Hill set at \$500,000.

“The process to make an award would continue to be open, transparent, and accountable and consistently followed ensuring the best possible value for the Town's purchasing dollar,” Mr. Leach continued. “The newly suggested threshold would apply as long as the recommended award is within the Council-approved current budget for such a project.”

Councillors, however, largely disagreed, with some arguing it would diminish what they viewed as a crucial role of the Town's elected officials, with others agreeing that it would simply be good business practice to set a budget and let staff do their jobs.

“Our role as Council is to maintain the financial integrity of the municipality and to ensure accountability for the operations,” said Councillor Michael Thompson. “I feel like I am delegating a little bit of my role and responsibility to staff. Staff do a great job and follow a great process, but I need a bit more of a compelling argument of turning that authority over to staff than [simply] better service levels and responding to better market conditions.”

Councillor Evelyn Buck went one step further. She said if this recommendation passed, Councillors run the risk of losing sight of what projects are on the table and that extra step of Council approval needs to be maintained.

“Councillor Thompson says we're delegating, but I think we're surrendering,” she said. “I am not looking for more work to do, but I am not interested in surrendering the authority people have given us to keep a close eye on what is being done.”

Although Councillor Sandra Humfries said she shared some of the views expressed by Councillors Buck and Thompson, others such as Councillor Paul Pirri and Mayor Geoffrey Dawe were supportive of the recommendation. Councillor Pirri, for instance, said the role of Council is to set policy and direction moving forward as long as Council has the chance to approve the tenders before they are issued.

“I think it is fair that it shouldn't have to come back to Council,” he said of the responses to the tenders and staff's recommendations on which bidder to pick. “We can do it in a much more efficient way and still maintain control of what goes on in the municipality.”

He went on to recommend that the \$200,000 be reduced down to \$100,000 with the provision that this number rise on the rate of inflation. The current limit of \$50,000 has been on the books for the better part of 15 years, they were told.

Although the second half of his recommendation was nixed for the moment pending further information coming back from staff, \$100,000 was the magic number approved.

?I don't see this as surrendering authority to staff,? said Mayor Dawe. ?I see that as delegating authority. In my opinion, the budget is exactly that. We set staff to do things, whether it is buy a truck, salt, or electricity.?

From Councillor Buck's perspective, however, that approach was all well and good if one is the operator of a private business, but the municipality is a different matter altogether.

?You like that term 'delegate' because you are a private business operator through and through and you are too old to change now,? she said to Mayor Dawe. ?It is hard to get used to how long it takes to get things done in a bureaucracy, but it is an essential part of the bureaucratic process. It is our job, it is why people elected us.?

Mayor Dawe, on the other hand, said this is exactly how it works at the Regional level.