

Council splits on motion calling for Mayor to define role

By Brock Weir

Aurora Councillors split down the middle last week in a motion calling on Mayor Geoffrey Dawe to define his own role in maintaining 'accountability' at Town Hall.

The motion was brought forward by Councillor Evelyn Buck objecting to what she said was an inability to 'seek accounting' from municipal departments, lest it is seen as 'micromanaging.' To clarify things, she asked the Mayor to draft a report to Council on where he saw his role fitting into this.

'This is not an attack on yourself, Mr. Mayor; this is a serious concern I have that Council cannot be accountable to the public for how this administration functions, if this administration is not accountable to Council,' said Councillor Buck.

'From my perspective, a Councillor is not only responsible to the whole community with how the corporation functions ' they are responsible for the people who function within the community. It disturbs me greatly to be told I cannot ask a question, I cannot determine whether a matter brought to my attention has any validity without being able to ask a question.'

Her concerns, she said, stemmed from a closed session meeting. Going into the meeting, she told Council in open session that she had concerns about an 'identifiable individual' and wanted some answers. She added last week she understood the 'sensitivity' about individual privacy but when she brought forward her concerns, Mayor Dawe told he could not make any enquiries 'because you perceive that not to be your role.'

'What I would like to receive from you is how you perceive your role,' said Councillor Buck. 'How can you persuade me that [the way] you perceive your role helps me fulfil my role? The Mayor is Councillors' man. If there is a subject of extreme delicacy that can't be brooded about and needs to be handled sensitively, then it should always be the Mayor that enquires into it and reports back to Council with complete privacy.'

Although she added she respected the Mayor's right to 'have his own sense' of what his role is, she said she wanted to make sure there wasn't a 'Berlin Wall' between Council and administration. Mayor Dawe, on the other hand, vehemently disagreed with Councillor Buck's motion, rejecting the idea her motion was not an attack on himself.

'When I first saw this, my first thought was there must be an election in the offing because silly season has started,' said Mayor Dawe. 'I said [during the 2010 election] I will not micromanage. I will depend on [Aurora CAO Neil] Garbe and all the senior directors here to manage the corporation. That is their job. That is what they are paid to do. Our job is to set policy and procedure.'

Coming prepared to the Council meetings with three guidebooks he said he has used to formulate his own idea on the Mayor's role, he said he had talked to counterparts in other municipalities, as well as those who have walked in his shoes to formulate his opinion.

'Contrary to what you feel, I find your motion to be condescending,' he added. 'It is absolutely critical. I have no problem indicating what I think my job is, but I will not support this motion because I do not believe this is Council's job and I do not believe this is a good use of Council time.'

Debate, nevertheless, ensued not just between Mayor Dawe and Councillor Buck, but also among Councillors on the merits of the motion.

'While you might feel everything is being done properly and everything that could be done is being done, I do not share your confidence,' continued Councillor Buck. 'I have tried to be respectful and not critical, but it is a question of a difference of perspective. You are too sensitive by far for the office of Mayor. My experience doesn't come from books. It comes from harsh, harsh lessons ' what people expect of us.'

Councillor Buck's motion was supported by Councillors Chris Ballard, Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo. For them, it was a matter of dissecting the four part motion, including the initial disagreement that spawned it, in favour of simply getting this report from the Mayor on 'accountability to the administration' to Council.

'From an education perspective, I see nothing wrong with this motion,' said Councillor Ballard. 'I think any time citizens are reminded about the functioning of democracy at Town Hall is a good thing. I am not attaching this to any particular event.'

Councillor Gallo said he agreed and it would 'educate' him and provide a 'better understanding' for the public as a whole.

'I share some of the concerns that Councillor Buck has expressed and this may help me better understand my concerns and how things are dealt with,' he said.

Added Councillor Gaertner: 'We all know there is a separation between the administration and the elected body, but at the end of the day it is this Council that is responsible, certainly, to some degree, and is held accountable for the actions of this administration. [The Mayor] is our CEO. It is a fair ask not only to make it clear to us, but also to make it clear to the public.'

Joining the mayor in voting against the motion were Councillors John Abel, Sandra Humfryes, Paul Pirri and Michael Thompson. For them, it was a matter of not sharing the concerns of the others, as well as them viewing the report as something other than the most productive way to spend time.

Councillor Thompson, for instance, argued it was Councillor Buck's concern and not a concern he shared.

'I have had meetings with every director here and raised my own questions to satisfy my own concerns and questions,' he said. 'I don't necessarily believe it has to go through the Mayor. We are a democracy. If the Mayor disagrees and all eight of us vote for anything, it doesn't mean it is vetoed. It is the majority decision.'

Added Councillor Pirri: 'I know what my responsibilities towards accountability are. Those are my feelings that are guided by the Municipal act and the way it is written out and the interpretation I have. If you would like the Mayor to write out his interpretation of the Municipal Act, I have to wonder why just the mayor? If we're all going to write our own interpretations of the municipal act and put them out so everyone can see them, that is fine.'