

Council tightens budget reins on community partners

By Brock Weir

Aurora is holding the budget reins tight when it comes to thousands of dollars worth of asks from cultural groups around the community ? and the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Historical Society and Sport Aurora are among those feeling the pinch.

Discussions over Aurora's Operating Budget for 2019 are set to resume on Monday, March 18, but when Council met last week to take the last kick at the can before March Break, over \$70,000-worth of asks were rejected, including \$40,000 for a new Communications Assistant at Town Hall, a \$30,400 increase to the Aurora Cultural Centre's 2019 Core Operating Grant, and a further boost of \$1,600 to the Aurora Historical Society.

Council's decision follows along the lines of a tone set by Mayor Tom Mrakas at the start of deliberations over the 2019 Operating Budget on February 25. Then, he said through discussions he had had with various community groups, as well as Council members, that it was largely agreed that ?Council should take a pause? when faced with requests for additional funding requests through this year's Budget cycle.

?In my discussions with staff and with each of you, there has been some support for the idea of allowing this Council time to re-evaluate how funding requests are put forward, reviewed and ultimately approved,? said Mayor Mrakas, addressing Council members at that meeting. ?Most important, there is support for the need to develop a policy that provides a clear, consistent and equitable funding request model. I think we can all agree, and as I have said before, it is our responsibility to ensure there is value and benefit to every taxpayer dollar that is spent and while I will respect the?majority of Council, it is my sincere hope that we will collectively utilize this opportunity to create a better funding request policy and ensure a level playing field going forward.

?We have and will continue to hold staff to a very high standard when it comes to how tax dollars are spent. I hope we will also hold anyone and any organization to that same high level of standard.?

That is just the principle they stuck to last Monday when faced with those requests for increased funding.

Council tackled the funding requests from the Aurora Historical Society and the Aurora Cultural Centre, the latter request of which was for increased operating costs, including salaries, in one go, with Mayor Mrakas reiterating his position.

Councillor John Gallo, however, said he had a different perspective.

My philosophy is, and I think I have said it before, that I look at all services that we provide, that is paid for by the taxpayer, on an equal basis, said Councillor Gallo. Whether we do it within these four walls, or whether it is done outside of these four walls, a service is being provided to the taxpayers and I treat everyone equally. We do lessons at the swimming pool, that's a service we provide. Or, the Historical Society provides a service, that is a service paid for by tax dollars. For me, we're treating these differently than other service providers and I just don't agree with that. I think we should look at them no differently from when we look at our staff that is internal, and there are areas where there have been increases in varying degrees, and I don't see why we single these out.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was on a similar wavelength, focusing her attention particularly on the request from the Aurora Cultural Centre, which she said would allow them to keep current staff in place. They are underpaid, she said, arguing that it was becoming an issue.

The staff has been very loyal, but I think they need a show of actual money, so I would ask you please to keep that in place, she said.

Mayor Mrakas responded that the Cultural Centre would be willing to fund this \$30,400 through their reserves for this year while Council hammers out a path forward for requests such as these, but, to Councillor Gaertner, this was not a practical solution.

The reserves they're talking about are the reserves that they're mandated to have in case, for some reason, they had to wrap up the function of the Aurora Cultural Centre, said Councillor Gaertner. Their reserve is not at the limit it should be anyway. Yes, they desperately need this money, but it is coming out of a very important reserve that I believe we mandate them to have. We're just taking that reserve down more.

Holding firm on the line, however, was supported by Council on a vote of 5 to 2, with Councillors Gaertner and Gallo in the opposition.

Stating her case in support of holding firm, Councillor Sandra Humfryes said Council set out with a clear mandate that we take a pause and, of these community partners, only the Aurora Public Library came in with a budget that fit within these parameters, which, in the Library's case, can largely be attributed to changes in staff.

Councillor Michael Thompson was also in the majority, arguing that within the Town's Cultural Services Agreement with the Aurora Cultural Centre, a certain amount of money is provided for services and they are to operate at arm's length.

They do a great job with those dollars, he said. They

provide a lot of programs and a lot of different things for the community but, at the end of the day, it was set up so they would operate at arm's length. If you look at the agreement, we give them autonomy to run that place. It clearly states we're not involved in the hiring and firing of positions and we haven't been?and they make those decisions. They make those decision to hire whomever they've chosen to hire, they've made salary decisions. So, while I am sympathetic to the fact that now they have made the realization that there are many people underpaid, that is their obligation to right the ship.

?It is understandable that they look to the Town to right-size it as we have done to our own, it is their responsibility so I am not in support of [the budget increase].?