

Councillors could take another stab at hiring freeze

By Brock Weir

A potential hiring freeze at Town Hall was left out in the cold earlier this month, but Councillors could take another stab at it this week after the previous attempt failed on a tie vote.

Going into this week's meeting, Councillors will be asked to approve a new vacancy control program proposed by interim CAO Patrick Moyle to have strict rules in place on how to address vacancies on Town positions if the need arises. If approved, the policy will make clear vacancies will not be filled automatically.

"Based on this principle, directors will, in the case of all vacancies, be required to submit a report to the CAO containing an analysis of the vacant position and a recommendation whether or not the position should be filled, changed or eliminated," says Mr. Moyle in his proposed plan, which goes on to note directors' consideration should weigh whether a position is mandated by law, if a position generates revenue, is necessary to the completion of capital projects, is of strategic importance, or if there is a "service level risk."

Council faced just such a situation earlier this month when they were asked to approve the hiring of a new water operator when a vacancy arose. This request raised concerns and considerable debate around the table after they approved a four month gapping on all hirings during the last budget cycle.

But, according to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, there are a certain number of people who should be on the team to ensure Aurora's water quality remains in the clear.

"We do have a limited number of staff for our water and wastewater department and do have fairly stringent regulatory requirements that we need to ensure we meet," said Mr. Simanovskis. "I just didn't want to hamper that group with a shortage for that length of time. It is not a matter of whether it will put residents at harm or not; it is a matter of risk management. The intent is making sure all the regulatory requirements are met. I am just trying to minimize the risk of any oversight.

"I can't give you what the risks are. All I am trying to say is we have a reduced work staff in that area and if Council chooses not to fill that at this time, then I am fine with that. I cannot say there is no risk."

This underlying uncertainty led to the majority of Council approving the new hire.

"I am not hearing there is a risk and I am not hearing there isn't a risk," said Councillor Paul Pirri, who initially spoke in opposition to the hire. "I think he is trying to couch his comments out of fear of interfering in the debate, but I truly respect his opinion. What I am getting is he's saying there is some risk to not moving forward. I still don't like that this is in front of us, but if that is what I am hearing, [I don't want to be] adding risk."

Ultimately, the hire was approved 6 ? 2 with Councillor John Abel absent from the meeting. Voting against the recommendation were Councillors Harold Kim and Tom Mrakas who said they were not convinced it was a necessity at this time.

"I think the boogeyman word here is 'risk' and any time someone says 'risk' we think the worst because no one wants to take risks when it comes to health and safety," said Councillor Kim. "I have children and I don't want to compromise my children or anyone else's, [but] I think if reducing the staff complement from six to five increases the risk that much that it is going to endanger the safety of our Town, I would question why we only have six on that team."

Added Councillor Mrakas: "What I am hearing from our director is while it might be difficult and some people might have to pick up the slack to keep everything moving forward, it is not impossible. We can do it. I don't see what the issue is and I will be voting against this."