

Councillors frustrated with "push-back" over budget cuts

By Brock Weir

If Council isn't given adequate information to make an 'informed decision' when it comes to reducing Aurora's proposed 3.95 per cent tax increase this year, they might just have to go it alone.

That was the opinion expressed by several Councillors last week as they sought ways to further reduce the forecasted tax increase by reducing a \$196,000 budget for training and development of municipal employees.

Last Tuesday's discussions around this component of the budget was not Council's first kick at the can but, for many, it was one too many. Talks centred on a motion brought forward by Councillor Tom Mrakas demanding specifics on how this money is spent and what impact a budget cut would have on the organization.

This information was requested last month and, in his opinion, the response from staff was lacking 'a view shared by others.

'At one point, we asked the CAO for a list of potential budget reductions to consider bringing it down and at no time was a reduction in the training and development budget considered at that time,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'Throughout this discussion, we, as a Council, have moved forward certain motions to see a reduction and there has been push-back. The majority around Council are saying let's look at training and development, and we're not getting that response back from the CAO's office. To me, there is a divide. It just seems that, in my opinion, we're not being listened to.'

Council approved Councillor Mrakas' motion 7 ? 2, with Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Jeff Thom voting against it.

Speaking in favour of the motion, Councillor Sandra Humfries said specifics were not provided to Council on the 'serious implications' such a reduction in the training budget would have on Town Hall. It was important to know, she said, how much of the budget was 'actually used year over year' for training.

Following Council's initial decision last month at the Committee level to slash the training budget by \$100,000 for this year in a one-off cost-saving measure, this decision was reversed the following week in favour of tasking staff to look within their departments to come up with \$300,000 in savings while boosting revenue by \$100,000 to bring the budget in at that magic number of 3.95 per cent.

At the time, however, Aurora CAO Neil Garbe said cuts to services used by residents were likely to meet that target, a prospect Councillors largely agreed was not the right way forward.

Council's request last week was a 'fair' one, said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott, but it is hampered by the fact the Town of Aurora does not have a central repository system to track training data and other items under this umbrella.

'We have over 200 full-time staff and over 400 part-time staff. Every single one of them are subject to training,' said Mr. Elliott. 'Many of them are annual training, many of them take multiple courses. Accordingly, to go through and develop and create essentially a repository for 2014 of each staff person's training, the cost of the conference and what they got'to go person to person, credential by credential, is going to take months.'

Although new systems to track just this could be in place as early as this year, Councillors advocating for cuts in this department, however, expressed surprise this information wasn't already kept in a centrally located, accessible fashion, including Councillor Harold Kim, who said it is often overlooked that cutting taxes is also a service to residents.

'I wonder why we keep having the same budget and having the budget increased for this particular item,' he said. 'By budget time, if we can't be given sufficient information to make an informed decision, then I am quite happy to make a decision without it. It is a no-brainer in terms of whether you choose plowing a sidewalk or choosing to reduce the education budget for a year.'

Added Councillor Thompson: ?I am not sure what was spent last year, or why [there was an increase] year after year. Those details are important to me. At one time we talked about the tax pressure as a result and to alleviate that tax pressure with sidewalk plow service. I can tell you right now I am not going to cut sidewalk plow service if there is an opportunity to reduce training.?

Given Mr. Elliott's statement it would take months to get the required information together, Mayor Dawe objected to the motion. Although he said he agreed it was important for Council to know what was being spent in this area of the budget, he questioned what Councillors ultimately would do with the information.

?If it comes down to putting money into training for staff, or putting money into snow plowing, I am pretty sure from what we've heard the money is going to go into snow plowing, which is fine,? said Mayor Dawe. ?That is a decision of Council, but that is a level of service we wish to provide our residents. It is not us managing the corporation. If we want to do that, I know how we can save six salaries anyway and we can cut the budget big time. If that's how Council wishes to manage the business, I presume that is Council's prerogative and I will not support the motion for that reason. There is no concept of the work we're going to ask staff to do, the cost, and we have no idea what we're going to do with the information.?

For Councillor Mrakas, however, it was clear what they intended to do with the information.

?I would be able to make a decision on whether I want to put forward a reduction in this item during budget time,? he said. ?I think that is pretty straightforward. I believe taxpayers deserve this information and I just don't understand why it is such an issue to get this information. I am sitting here [and hearing] we don't track that and it would be too expensive to track that. Yet, we are spending \$200,000 for a corporation of this size to send people for training and development. Training and development is important but I don't think spending this amount of money in a year where our tax rate is at such a high level it is warranted.?