

Councillors question \$35,000 price tag for NBA viewing parties

Aurora Town Square was the place for basketball fans to gather over the summer as Aurora native Andrew Nembhard made the NBA Finals as a member of the Indiana Pacers.

A first for the Town's newest gathering space, viewing events at Town Square raised questions from Council at last week's Committee of the Whole meeting when a report came before Council noting the seven watch parties that took place between June 5 and June 22 cost \$34,920.

The report, penned by Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, noted the viewing parties "gave the community an opportunity to show their support, connect with neighbours, and take pride in one of Aurora's own making it to the NBA's biggest stage."

While the report stated approximately 635 attendees came out over the course of the seven viewing parties, some Councillors questioned whether it was value for taxpayers' money.

"Just talking about the return on investment, the community impacts, and the metrics of that, attendance did fluctuate a lot and obviously for various reasons," said Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland. "It did foster some community spirit, which is great, but we don't really understand what the feedback was. We don't know if it was the same people that were attending. It could have been the same 50 ? 180 people that came [as] I think it fluctuated from 50 to 180 people that attended?. I'm just trying to really justify, obviously, the overall cost because it was a pretty big bill, about \$5,000 per viewing."

She questioned whether post-event surveys were done to get metrics on those who attended.

McDougall said metrics would be difficult to fully analyze as the viewings were not ticketed events, and said costs could be different for viewing parties going forward as they consider whether such programs will be equipped on an as-needed rental basis, or whether permanent equipment could be secured in a future municipal operating budget.

"We do have some testimonials about engagement and it was very well received for those that were in attendance," said McDougall. "They were excited, in particular [with] this case, that it was basketball because it's not [a sport] that has received that kind of recognition. Other municipalities have honed in on hockey, so it was nice for basketball to be the centre of attention for a change. That was a certain comment we received, but I can find out more certainly regarding feedback."

While Councillor Gilliland said she found the event "expensive on a per person basis" she also said she heard concerns from local bars and pubs that the municipal viewing parties was "taking away or driving business away."

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, in whose ward Aurora Town Square sits, added he fielded questions from residents complaining about the noise following the first viewing party (the space was reconfigured for subsequent evenings), while Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said he had questions on the process.

"First, a huge congratulations to Andrew and his success ? he went to school with my kids, so there is a particular happiness in seeing him succeed to the highest levels," he said. "I'm not weighing whether it was a good idea or not a good idea; I'm just trying to understand the process."

Defending the price tag was Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, who said discussion over cost and process was "missing the whole point of this event" which was to celebrate homegrown talent.

"We need to support the principle of why we are doing it and not necessarily the result. I understand that as part of being on Council, we question the finances, we question noise and other things that are important to residents, but sometimes we have to overlook

some of the negatives, when we see that the long-term positives of something like this far outweighs it," said Councillor Kim. "Think about the community pride that this represents. I mean, you don't think that 10, 20 years [from now], someone's not going to nominate him for the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame? You don't think that when Andrew Nembhard is saying that, 'Yeah, my Council is having a watch party on my behalf,' I mean, how proud he is of Aurora. I was watching the game on TV and he mentioned that [on the air] I was proud that Aurora was mentioned. That type of marketing is invaluable.

"Companies pay \$2 million or \$5 million for a 30 second spot in the Super Bowl and we get a free mention for what, \$35,000, and we inconvenience a few residents because of noise, or here we are questioning the validity because of soft costs or hard costs."

He drew parallels between this first round of viewing parties and the Town's inaugural Multicultural Festival which had a smaller turnout in its first iteration "but attendance grew year over year.

"No one questions the Multicultural Festival now or the expenditures, so I go back to, why are we doing this? Look at the principle and stick to it," Councillor Kim continued. "Anybody in the investment world that I come from, you have to have discipline and you have to have investment principles and you stick to it. Just because a stock goes down in two weeks, doesn't mean you abandon it. You stick to the reasons why you invested in it.

"We talk about in the Aurora Economic Development Corporation about how do we market Aurora. Well, I would submit to you that Andrew Nembhard is probably the best marketing and business representative for Aurora at this time. If we have another watch party next year and we're fortunate that he makes it to the finals, Aurora born, I'd be proudly in support."

Councillors contended, however, they had every right to question how taxpayer dollars are spent and doing so is no reflection on the value in which they hold Nembhard and his career.

"We should be questioning this and studying it for the future because we're spending taxpayers' money and we're accountable to them," said Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "All of these questions are valid, in my opinion. Also, we have a place in our reports for how it fits in with the Strategic Plan. The one given here was the goal of supporting an exceptional quality of life for all. There are probably many people in this Town who might've found the spend of money very interesting and not at all of any importance to them. It doesn't mean we shouldn't do these things, but we should do them with a process, and we should have guidelines, and we should be asking these questions."

Added Councillor Gilliland: "I didn't realize I was going to get schooled from my fellow Council colleague about asking questions about a budget item that the taxpayers have paid over \$35,000 for these watch parties. Yes, it is our job to question these things. I think as Mayor Mrakas has said, it is the people's budget, and if we're going to scrutinize over everything, let's scrutinize over everything.

"If people around this council table pick and choose what they want to scrutinize, as far as I'm concerned, anything that's on the agenda, I'm going to ask questions, and there are missing loops. Nobody around this Council table said anything negative about Andrew. We are all proud of Andrew. We're proud of all the athletes in Aurora, but we're also proud of our own residents, whether athletes or not, as well as our own small businesses that are trying to survive, and our taxpayers. It is our duty to ask questions and there's nothing wrong with that. I am making no apologies for asking these questions."

By Brock Weir
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