

Councillors tangle over booze bill entertaining Canadian Food & Wine Institute

By Brock Weir

Niagara College's Canadian Institute of Food & Wine is set to soon bring its viniculture expertise to Aurora, but a dinner held before Council inked its agreement to transform the Aurora Armoury into a satellite campus of the college has one Councillor seeing red. Last week, Councillor John Abel took Council to task for a \$2,500 tab picked up by the office of Aurora's CAO to entertain College officials prior to a December General Committee meeting.

While Councillor Abel said he had issue not only with the bar tab ? which amounted to \$395 of the total bill ? but also with the fact a majority of Council members were at the dinner, others cried foul over his objections, noting that Councillor Abel himself participated in part of the proceedings.

?I asked [under] New Business of General Committee that [CAO Doug Nadorozny] that Council, members of the ELT (Executive Leadership Team) along with Niagara College attended a dinner prior to the General Committee meeting of December 5 and asked him for the amount of the bill,? said Councillor Abel. ?I did attend, I did consume a glass of water and I met with every attendee at Niagara College and spoke with each for about five minutes, but I did not stay for dinner. I went home and got ready for the General Committee meeting.

?What was most [concerning is] that there is the consumption of alcohol paid by the taxpayers and also members were consuming before coming to a Committee and, most alarmingly, it was in a secluded room with five members of Council prior to an agenda item with Niagara College.?

Several Council members at last week's meeting raised their respective eyebrows to what Mayor Dawe called Councillor Abel's ?insinuations,? prompting him to go further.

?\$395 was consumed in alcohol and that would represent, on average, maybe two drinks per person that was in attendance; it's an average,? Councillor Abel continued, before tackling the second issue. ?What I am really concerned about is we were in a secluded area with five Councillors and an agenda item. We learned from procedural?you have to guard against being in an area with five Councillors and taking on the course of business. If you are going to go to restaurants, five at a time, be at an open place, publically, where you were seen.?

Those individuals sitting around the Council table last week took issue with his arguments, particularly the accusation that business might have been advanced behind closed doors, particularly with between Councillors Abel and Paul Pirri who exchanged a heated volley.

?I was there and I left,? said Councillor Abel.

?You were there,? countered Councillor Pirri. ?You ventured in.?

?That's fine,? replied Councillor Abel. ?I am not defending myself, I am just saying that, optically, that is not a good thing to do and I left.?

Councillor Michael Thompson, jumping into the debate, stated there was ?nothing wrong? with Councillors ?getting together? as a group.

?What is not okay is materially advancing the Town's business,? he said. ?We often get together at events, the Santa Claus parade, different fundraising functions, and what we can't do is materially advance the Town's business. Let's be clear on that one.?

Councillor Thompson asked Mr. Nadorozny to expand on the email he sent to Councillors in response to Councillor Abel's request for the numbers.

?While our policies do not allow staff to individually expense alcohol as part of a meal claim, it is customary and appropriate to allow for modest alcohol expense to be covered as part of a hospitality or economic development event,? said Mr. Nadorozny.

?Given the significance of this partnership and the fact it is a partnership with the Canadian Food & Wine Institute, I felt it was appropriate to include alcohol in the event as a gesture of good hospitality. As for the gathering of Council, there are many times where all of Council is in a room other than this room (Council Chambers) and I think it is only when the business of the Council is moved forward in material ways that people would and ought to object.?

The CAO's Office, he added, has a Council approved budget of \$7,000 allocated for receptions and hospitality.

?There are many events hosted in the Skylight Gallery that Council has been a part of, where alcohol has been served, and it has been paid for by the Town,? said Councillor Thompson. ?The one that comes to mind is the inauguration, which Councillor Abel and myself have both been to on two occasions. Alcohol was served and paid for by the Town. Certainly if anybody does not agree with that policy, they have a right to put forward a notice of motion that can be changed. That has been the policy since we've

been here.?