

## Digital access, complete communities recommended as part of service review

As Aurora continues its growth away from being a small town, connecting communities ? whether physically or digitally ? will be key in moving forward.

These were among the findings of a Service Level Review presented to Council last week.

The Town's Service Level Review was commissioned in May of 2020 to look at ways municipal services could be delivered in more efficient and cost-effective ways.

The resulting study compared Aurora's service levels to like-sized communities like Newmarket, Caledon and Ajax.

Consultants found that ?growth will require Aurora to continuously modernize and digitize operations to achieve cost-efficiencies? on programs delivered at Town Hall, that ?innovation? will be required to deliver recreation and cultural programs as the community ages and becomes increasingly diverse, that development charges (DCs) from incoming developers will need further examination to ensure money continues to flow into municipal coffers, and that efforts need to be made to focus on transportation connectivity, especially for pedestrians and cyclists.

?Overall, the Town is in a healthy position from a financial and organizational capacity perspective,? say consultants in the resulting report. ?Aurora's financial health was assessed against approximately 65 indicators, with the Town performing at or above average for nearly all indicators. Aurora's taxation levels are also on par with that of comparators.

?Moving forward, it is important for Aurora to leverage change management to ensure staff at all levels can embrace the desired future state of Aurora.?

While Aurora got a good bill of financial health, the report outlined a number of areas for improvement.

One area consultants said needed further support was the delivery of recreational and cultural programs.

Culture was an area where several factors were reported as being ?below standard? compared to other communities, and these include the areas of downtown revitalization and public art.

?There is a specific opportunity to hire a cultural programmer to deliver on cultural programming at or near par with the recreation programming service level,? they found. ?This resource can also support the development of a Public Art Master Plan, including commissioning, curatorial, maintenance, and conversation. There is also opportunity for Cultural Programmers to work more closely with Recreation programmers, given the alignment in job descriptions and duties. There might be limited funds to resource the new positions in the Cultural Division. Should Council pursue this as a priority, there is an opportunity to dedicate internal capacity to apply for federal, provincial and other external grants.?

Keeping pace with other communities will require innovation and the consultants underscored a few initiatives already underway which will help in this department.

Mayor Tom Mrakas' idea to pursue accessible public wi-fi for the community got a shot in the arm with consultants stating the investigation into how feasible it is for Aurora should continue.

?Accessible public wi-fi is one way for the Town to increase digital inclusion and establish infrastructure required for future smart improvements,? they said, adding that Open Streets, an initiative that sees some roads converted into pedestrian-friendly spaces, is something that was identified as a priority by residents through the consultation process, as was a move for more ?connected? communities.

?In 2020, the Town of Aurora conducted a Master Transportation Study that did an in-depth analysis of how future growth will impact transportation services, including roads. The study recommended that the Town focus on managing the existing network while improving connectivity and safety, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists.?

Upon presentation last week, Council was largely supportive of their findings with some lawmakers, such as Councillors Wendy Gaertner, Rachel Gilliland and Michael Thompson questioning how the myriad recommendations in the report could and should be prioritized.

Consultant Srusti Pandya said the recommendations are organized in ?waves? on how they would suggest prioritization, but these details will be left to Council and staff.

?There will also be internal considerations like the budgeting process and other discussions internally that may require staff to reconsider the prioritization,? said Ms. Pandya. ?We have provided guidance but we see it [as a] matter of internal dialogue to determine the prioritization.?

Replied Councillor Thompson: ?Coming into this, I had a certain mindset and hope of what to get out of this process and based on my review of the document I am quite pleased. I think [the report] provides a good foundation upon which to build [and] gives us some direction for the next few years to continue to drive efficiencies.?

A similar sentiment was shared by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who added: ?I very much feel that there were no big surprises, but it was nice to see that we have been providing services and our Town speaks very highly ? our residents often talk about exactly what is in this report on which they enjoy.?

Mayor Mrakas also voiced his support, stating there is more to be done to provide the ?best possible service? to Aurora residents.

?When we wanted to go through this exercise, we wanted to identify what we could do as a municipality to provide the best possible service at the best possible price for our residents,? he said. ?My takeaways right away are the fact when I go through this report it speaks to the fact that the Town is in a strong financial position, the majority of Town services are being performed at or above standard and the Town is actively investing in continuous improvement and has a strong culture with dedicated staff, committed to ensuring service delivery excellence to its citizens.

?I think that speaks to what we have been doing around this table for a while. It doesn't mean there needs to be more done. Obviously, the whole part of this exercise is to find opportunities, which have been identified. I am very happy with what is in front of us. It identifies we are on the right track, we have been on the right track, there is more to do and we will continue to do that and provide the best possible service for our residents at the best price.?

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter