

## Elected officials should reimburse Town for conference expenses if they decide not to seek re-election: resident suggests

As Council prepares to approve a new reporting mechanism to share amongst themselves and the wider community what they learned attending conferences and other events on the taxpayer's dime, a further layer of accountability should be added, suggested a resident.

If a Council member attends a conference or similar event at the public's expense in the last six months of a Council term and then decides not to seek re-election, they should have to reimburse the Town, stated resident John Hartman at last week's General Committee meeting.

Hartman made his suggestion in response to a report in front of Committee outlining the new reporting framework.

The reporting framework has been in the works since the end of April and will require members of Council attending such events to report back not only on the costs incurred, but key learnings and takeaways, any relevant best practices or ideas that could be considered for implementation in the Town of Aurora, and these reports will be made public.

Aurora has seven Council members, of whom four attended conferences, representing a 57 per cent participation rate, said the staff report. Aurora's total spend on Council conferences was \$10,164, which is below the peer-municipality average total expenditure of \$15,035. When costs are examined on a per-attendee basis, Aurora's average spend per attending Council member was \$2,541, compared to a peer average of \$3,132. This indicates that Aurora's per-participant conference costs are meaningfully lower than the average of comparable municipalities. When assessed across all members of Council, including those who did not attend conferences, Aurora's average spend per Council member was \$1,452, compared to the peer-municipality average of \$1,678.

Delegating to last week's meeting, Hartman said the numbers might look good on the surface but needs some additional context on location, accommodation, and more and more information beyond what is proposed should be considered as part of the report.

The draft external report template is extremely well done. I might suggest it also include a question asking how many other Council members attended the same conference or event, said Hartman. This way, when summaries and reports are made public, people know exactly how many other Council members attended that same event. It might be a promising start for the idea of transparency.

Based on me speaking to over a dozen community members, including several Council and staff, it's to be noted that no Council member should attend such an event or conference at the Town of Aurora's expense, should that person declare they are not running for Council in the next election. That window of non-attendance should be no more than six months. I accept that a person has until the end of August of an election year to declare their intentions, but should an event, conference, or seminar occur within that period that they attend, then they declare they are not running, the Town of Aurora should seek ways to have the funds fully reimbursed. It is somewhat shameful that someone would leverage Town funds for their own gain without any benefit to the Town nor its taxpayers.

Hartman's suggestions were considered by Council, with Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner suggesting she could bring forward a motion that no Council member may attend conferences in the last six months of the term.

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