

Expanding local calls could come at a cost

By Brock Weir

Change could soon be in the air on what it means to make a local call.

Council voted to get the ball rolling on expanding Bell Canada's Local Calling Area for Aurora, following a motion from Mayor Geoffrey Dawe.

As The Auroran reported last month, Mayor Dawe put forward a motion asking staff to investigate starting the process to expand the parameters of how far a local call can get you in Aurora.

Residents may call the City of Toronto without incurring long distance charges, but will incur long distance charges when placing calls to communities such as Maple and Markham which are physically closer, said Mayor Dawe in his motion.

He reiterated his position when it came up for discussion nearly a month later last Tuesday.

I have had a number of people enquire as to why they can call The Beaches but can't call their friends in Markham, he said. Council directs the Clerk to start the process with Bell, and Bell comes back to the Town with a figure of what it would cost to change.

This cost to change could be key in future decisions when all the information is gathered by municipal staff and preliminary negotiations are made. Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who works in the telecommunications business away from the Council table, cautioned this has played a factor in previous attempts to expand the area.

This used to be a very big issue because long distance was really expensive, but it is relatively cheap these days, she said. When we get Bell Canada coming back to us to inform us of what those charges are, I would like to see the difference because they will raise the local rate.

These were concerns shared by Councillor Evelyn Buck, who said if this goes forward, people in the community need to be adequately notified of any changes that might result on their bills.

People in the community were going to see their telephone bills increase and had to be informed that that's what Council was all about, said Councillor Buck of the negotiations which were made to provide direct telephone access to Toronto decades ago. The reason Scarborough and Markham weren't included was it would have been even more of a cost to [users] so the option was just for the direct access to Toronto.

It still cost us money. Telephone bills were higher and, at the same time, the community supported the motion. We must consult with the community, unless the [situation] has changed and it will not cost more money.

The Town of Aurora's relationship with Bell Canada has come under increasing scrutiny over the past two months, stemming from Bell erecting a new multi-storey telecommunications tower on Bathurst Street, about 100 metres into the King side of the street, looming over a west Aurora neighbourhood.

While talks between the Town and Bell to come to a solution have come to naught, Councillor Chris Ballard said he saw an opportunity with talks to increase the local calling area.

I am certainly in favour of this, he said. I was going to make a bit of a tongue-in-cheek comment that given the need to refurbish the tarnished image in the Town because of the telecommunications tower, Bell might be wise to implement this at no cost to the good folks of Aurora.

One Councillor, however, disagreed with the comment, however tongue-in-cheek.

?I don't think Bell has a tarnished image and I would like to distance myself as far away as possible to those comments that were just made,? said Councillor Paul Pirri.

What do you think? As more and more people shift to cell phones over their land lines, or seek third party companies to come up with their long distance plans, do you welcome the chance to expand the local calling area? Would you be willing to pay a little more for your local calls for a wider local area? Send your thoughts to letters@auroran.com.