

Financial 'task force' will oversee Joint Ops construction and spending

By Brock Weir

When Aurora Councillors signed off on the next steps to make the Town's new Joint Operations Centre (JOC) a reality earlier this year, it was amid calls that those who opposed the project failed to offer solutions to their objections.

One idea stemming out of these talks is set to be borne to fruition this week with the establishment of a financial 'task force' with a mandate to oversee all spending on the project.

The proposed JOC, which will combine Aurora's Parks and Public Works departments into one new facility near the top of Industrial Parkway North, has become the subject of much scrutiny over the last six months, as costs have ballooned to from an initial estimate of nearly \$15 million to approximately \$26 million, due to an expanding scope of the project and engineering challenges encountered on the land.

Although Council was split on how to proceed with the project, those in favour of moving forward said they were 'frustrated' that those opposed to the plans brought little to the table other than complaints. Asking for ideas or solutions, at least one rose to the top 'the financial task force.

Floated by Councillor Chris Ballard amid his concerns over the expanding price tag of the project, he said establishing a financial 'task force' to oversee the spending with the Mayor and at least one Councillor being on the committee, would give him 'some comfort' with the project going forward.

'I have studied the Newmarket Centre and talked to elected officials and staff there, and they found this task force approach was very effective,' said Councillor Ballard. 'Their ops centre actually came in under budget and every expense was examined by the Committee and voted on by the Committee. It is quite unique that you have staff, project planners and architects all sitting around the table and it gave Council some comfort that two members of Council were sitting on that Committee to help explain to Council what was going on from a financial perspective.

'I am not happy with this going ahead, but if we're going to go ahead with it, I would strongly urge that we move forward with a budget control task force.'

At the end of the day, Councillors were ultimately in favour of putting a body such as this in place. When asked by Councillor Michael Thompson to weigh on such an idea, Aurora CAO Neil Garbe said the pros far outweigh any cons of a task force.

'[Members would] share an equal voice around the table, which is extremely positive,' said Mr. Garbe, noting the only significant challenge would be to find committee members with flexible schedules should an urgent matter arise. 'I think it adds a lot of value to the project and gives Council a lot of confidence in the role staff are playing.'

Questioned by Councillor Paul Pirri at the time whether having a financial task force in place would be enough for Councillor Ballard to vote in favour of the project, Councillor Ballard said it would 'go some way to convincing me', but ultimately voted against the overall project in the end.

'I don't even know where to tackle it,' said Councillor Ballard. 'The only other idea I have is to cap the budget to say. 'What would it mean if we could only spend \$18 million? \$20 million? To me, that sounds like an awful lot of work for staff to go through. I think because of the property we're proposing to build this on, our costs are out of control. That does not mean I am suggesting going out and buying another piece of property, but I would be quite happy to go back to staff for a range of options.'

If approved at the Committee level this week, and ultimately at the April 22 Council meeting, the financial task force will go at least one step further in providing Mayor Dawe and the Councillor appointed to the task force oversight on the project.

?The purpose of this task force would be to oversee financial decisions for the project,? said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, in his report to Councillors this week. ?However, as financial decisions are driven by project requirements, staff are recommending that the scope of the task force be expanded to incorporate overall construction monitoring. This would be to fully engage the task force in ongoing project delivery challenges, resulting in a better understanding of project impacts and alternatives.

?This approach, it is believed, will better inform the task force members and facilitate better decision-making, thereby affecting the goal of responsible financial management of the project.?