

Fire budget in Newmarket's hands following Aurora green light

By Brock Weir

This year's budget for the Central York Fire Services (CYFS) is in the hands of Newmarket Council following Aurora giving the nod last week.

Councillors convened in a Special Council Meeting last Tuesday to give the budget for the fire department, which serves both Aurora and Newmarket, before sending it up to Newmarket which is the CYFS' ultimate approval authority.

Aurora is a 40 per cent funder of the Central York Fire Services and both municipalities are facing an annual increase of 1.3 per cent on the fire budget through 2020 to ensure services are maintained 'seamlessly' as demand from growth increases.

This growth down the road will be addressed through the adoption of a new Master Fire Plan, which calls for an additional fire station to be constructed to serve both municipalities 'with potential land being eyed in the area of Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad' that will also serve as a new training facility, requiring a new crew to go along with it.

Last week's meeting was something of an anomaly, however, coming to a Special Council meeting for comment before these comments were sent directly to Newmarket for their review. Typically, such a budget comes first to General Committee allowing a further week for consideration and public input.

This was a one-off for this year, according Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, after Aurora delayed its budget process creating a lag in approval for Newmarket.

'It is a one-time meeting due to the arrangements with scheduling the budget meetings after the election,' elaborated Town Solicitor Warren Mar.

Added Mr. Elliott: 'What we're looking for was ways of getting our comments from GC tonight. The strategy we have taken as a funding strategy is not related to the specific details of Central York Fire that is on our [agenda] tonight. That is the funding envelope that is being provided to the Fire Chief for this year, whereas our funding is separate from that.'

This didn't sit well with Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said she believed it set a precedent for how this might be handed in future year.

Indeed, when the budget came up for further discussion, there were few comments to be sent up to Newmarket other than those offered by Councillor Gaertner. Chief among them was Newmarket's role as the ultimate approval authority for the Central York Fire budget, something she said should be reconsidered the next time the municipalities' fire agreement comes up for review.

An window to potentially do something about that, she said, closed in 2011 and she wanted to know when it might open again.

'Under the current agreement, it is very clear that Newmarket is the operator of the fire service,' said Mr. Elliott. 'They report administratively back to Newmarket's Council. The Fire Chief is a Newmarket employee and we are simply a funding partner for a joint service, overseen and controlled by Newmarket Council.'

That being said, it is at the Joint Council Committee, the group comprising of Councillors from both municipalities to oversee the CYFS, that Aurora can flex its muscle in influencing the operations and budget within the department.

Despite these issues, the Councillor said she was 'pleased' reductions had been made in the CYFS' budget before final approval came up.

'I think there was quite a lot of compromise on this,' she said.

Newmarket reviewed the budget at their Committee of the Whole meeting on Monday afternoon. It is expected to come before their Council for final ratification next Monday. They also laid the groundwork for beginning dialogue between Aurora, Newmarket and Richmond Hill to explore the possibility of bringing the southern municipality into the CYFS fold.