

Independent audit moves forward on Joint Operations Centre

By Brock Weir

An independent audit to look into full costs of ? and just what went wrong with ? the construction of Aurora's new Joint Operations Centre moved forward last week amid comments the numbers were being used as a ?political football.?

Council voted to make the Joint Operations Centre (JOC), the recently completed home of Aurora's Parks and Public Works departments, subject to an independent audit using auditors retained by the Region after continued questions about how much has been spent on it and why key items related to the build were taken out of the project in order to meet budget and timelines.

Getting the ball rolling at last week's Council meeting was Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who formalized the motion to send the project to an arm's length auditor after Mayor Geoff Dawe proposed the idea at the previous week's General Committee meeting.

In her comments, Councillor Gaertner said there were three problems most evident to her. The first, she said, started with the purchase of land at the top of Industrial Parkway North, which presented many challenges to a build of this scale.

?That land sat vacant for many, many years because the developer couldn't develop it,? she said. ?I think we could have done a little more due diligence right up front to see what the issues were with the land and just gone in with our eyes more open.?

The second issue she cited was the scale of the project, which was initially attempted without a formal project manager.

?You need an experienced project manager,? she said, on the position which was filled partway through the build. ?We would have spent more money on that, but I think we would have saved more money and would have had more credibility with the public.?

The third issue was the oversight committee put in place by Council to oversee the construction. The terms of reference for the group were clear, she said, but it needed expert help to do the job.

?We really messed up with this one,? she concluded.

Councillor Gaertner's motion for an independent audit was widely supported by Council in general, but the specifics of what the audit might look into was questioned by a minority of Councillors. One amendment she put forward called for a ?comprehensive? list of lessons learned from the JOC construction, building on a few bullet points offered the previous week by Town Treasurer Dan Elliott.

Such a list would be important for future councils if another large-scale project comes up under their watch.

?I think in a bad situation we have a really good opportunity to add to our corporate knowledge,? she said, adding another amendment that a further report be forthcoming on everything spent on the JOC.

Ultimately supported by Council, Councillor Harold Kim expressed frustration over the number crunching, saying that simply adding the items in the report before Council came to \$27.3 million to build the JOC, which does not include expected offsetting revenue from the sale of the former works yard on Scanlon Court.

?I feel like we're playing political football with this item and I am not very pleased with that,? said Councillor Kim. ?I mentioned over a year ago that we need clarification with the numbers, how much it cost, and let's bring a report forward. We have had three renditions of this and it seems we're playing hot potato. At first nobody wants to touch it and now everyone wants to touch it. How many times can we slice and dice the numbers??

Nevertheless, it was noted by CAO Doug Nadorozny that it will be difficult to crunch a final bill because there are still over \$1 million-worth of outstanding items once in the budget, taken out to meet budget numbers, and now deemed necessary to put back in the project.

?I think the spirit is that once all these things are here we can finally put it all together because, as it stands right now, it is not complete,? said Councillor John Abel. ?We want an audit, we want lessons learned, and we want to complete everything and be able to say, at the very end, this is what it costs. For clarity and transparency I am in support of moving forward in that direction.?

Councillor Gaertner echoed these concerns: ?I think we need to know what we spent on the OC because I think the public needs to know. It needs to be on record.?

Added Councillor Pirri: ?I agree with Councillor Kim that getting another report at this stage in the game won't be of any benefit to us around the table, but I do agree with Councillor Gaertner that once we have decided how much we are spending, once we get the tenders back, to know how much these projects are going to be costing us.?

For other Council members, particularly Councillors Sandra Humfries and Tom Mrakas, there is still the lingering question over how and why items now deemed necessary, were taken out of the construction.

?How did we get to that stage to remove those when we needed them?? asked Councillor Mrakas. ?Where did that authority come from? Who gave that direction? Council never gave that direction if my memory serves me. I have looked through every report. If

we are going to remove big ticket items that we need, then it should be Council that decides.?

?One of the reasons I suggested the audit,? replied Mayor Dawe, ?was I believe the audit will be an objective third party and I believe it will show that all major decisions were made by this Council.?