

Money spent on Aurora 150 may be aired at Council following contentious motion

By Brock Weir

Events surrounding Aurora's 150th anniversary might already be a part of history, but the cost of the Sesquicentennial Celebrations could be in focus this week if Councillor Wendy Gaertner gets her way.

Councillor Gaertner is due to take a second stab in getting her motion calling for a full report on money that was spent for the series of events designed to celebrate Aurora's Past, Present & Future, as well as the Four Seasons of Aurora, this week after it was tabled at the Council table mid-discussion last month due to time constraints.

Councillor Gaertner's motion calls on staff to "prepare a report detailing the use of" the budget approved by Council, in the interests of "financial transparency and accountability" of public money.

"Some of us have a printout of some of the costs and it is hard to make sense of it," said Councillor Gaertner. "This is a lot of money, it belongs to the public, let's have a staff report on how it was spent."

The motion, however, raised the objections of many Councillors around the table who said not only was \$90,000 spent on the celebrations, less than half of what was budgeted for, members of the Aurora 150 Committee came forward to Council several times with budget updates, and a general ledger of expenses was presented to Council, and the public.

"[With a general ledger] it really requires a report," said Councillor Gaertner. "A report back to Council on how the money was spent is appropriate. Giving us a general ledger sheet that the residents have to go through [is not enough]."

Councillors, however, were unmoved, with Councillor Paul Pirri arguing that there couldn't be a "more clear demonstration" of where the money went than the general ledger.

"If there was some information that wasn't available, I could understand this motion, but at this point in time, all the information is in the public."

A similar view was put forward by Councillor Michael Thompson who said he was unsure of what Councillor Gaertner was looking for as a line by line list of expenses had already been provided.

"We had a budget presented to us early on, Council approved it, we have had Sesquicentennial [Committee] minutes before us and Council has approved them," he said. "We had a wrap-up that said exactly how much had been spent and the fact they were \$100,000 under budget and we approved that."

There has been more information provided by this Committee than any other committee I can find when I look back. Show me another committee that actually produced a general ledger of what they spent over the last eight years.

"None of them have done what this committee has done with providing that information to the public. It begs the question: Why is Councillor Gaertner targeting this committee? Why not ask for a report for any and all committees? Let's go back and do any and all committees. It is a bit of a boondoggle, I think."

For other Councillors, seeing the words "accountability" and "transparency" in the motion made them see red because, they said, it might imply that that accountability and transparency wasn't there to begin with. Councillor John Abel, for instance, said that particularly "alarmed" him.

Councillor Sandra Humfryes agreed, noting that by singling out a committee that was formed by community volunteers could send the wrong message to other volunteers within the community looking to lend a hand.

?They volunteered to come forward and planned a year of events meeting weekly with documented minutes, leadership from our staff there throughout the whole process, and putting on events that were spectacular,? she said. ?I don't want volunteers to be hurt by this. I don't want volunteers that come forward and give their time to be afraid later on that Council is going to want a detailed report. It just insinuates something I am not comfortable with right now.

?I won't support this motion because it is focusing on one committee. I may entertain thinking about all committees, but I am just really worried about how this is going to come across. I would like to understand how many hours these volunteers put forward?and calculate that work by an hourly rate and how much we gained as a Town on their hard work. I would like to see that side of the coin, too.?

At the end of the day, however, Councillor Gaertner suggested the others were looking far too much into the motion.

?I don't understand why I am getting so much pushback,? she said. ?I am asking for a formal report from Town Staff about?money that belongs to the public [who] deserve to know how it was spent ? and not by having to go through a ledger sheet and not by looking at a committee report. I am not suggesting anything untoward. The committee did a fantastic job. It is the wrap-up report -- \$140,000 is a lot of money. Let's just have a staff report on this.?