

More online access on the way for public meetings

By Brock Weir

Your options to watch local democracy unfold live from the comfort of your desk or living room will soon increase dramatically as Council plans to expand their live-streaming program.

Councillors approved a plan last week to cover all public meetings that take place in the Council chambers and are not covered by Rogers Television onto their website, including all General Committee Meetings and Public Planning meetings.

The Town of Aurora began live streaming Council's General Committee meetings last October, following an initial low-key pilot earlier that summer with a public meeting on Aurora's Strategic Plan. While it has been somewhat of a trial and error for the Town's communications staff to figure out what equipment is necessary and what configurations are ideal, the pilot project has been a success and is poised to continue.

Streaming General Committee via internet is feasible, economical, and has demand, said Aurora CAO Neil Garbe in a report to Council. Over the course of the pilot, an 'in-house' solution, 'standalone' solution and wireless solution were all explored and each option was used successfully. The Town now has the capability to stream meetings in Council Chambers, in other meeting rooms, and at offsite locations if required.

Staff time during General Committee meetings was required for the pilot but will not be required if Council chooses to continue the streaming service.

Councillors welcomed the fact the meetings have been streamed successfully, but said there is always room for more. When asked by Councillor Ballard if streaming additional meetings above and beyond General Committee to also include Budget meetings and Public Planning Sessions, Michael Kemp, the Town's Manager of Corporate Communications, said there would be no cost impact for more meetings.

For some, however, that didn't go far enough. Councillor John Gallo, for instance, said the part of the purpose of livestreaming was to provide an alternate broadcast source for citizens not only in Aurora, but those who may be on vacation, or have moved, to be able to access the meetings. Rogers, however, does broadcast the regular Council meetings online. They also have the exclusive broadcast rights to do so under the terms of their contract to install their own cameras in the Council chambers.

The cameras installed by Rogers are also available for the municipality to use in order to live stream their meetings under their contract, with the Rogers technician available to staff in order to train them on how to take advantage of the system.

That, however, would come at a price, according to Mr. Kemp.

I would have to have multiple staff trained and we would have to pay them for their time in the evening to do that, he said. I do not have any staff that is technically proficient in using audio boards. [Our current technology] doesn't need anybody running it now. Now that we have done all the testing, it is self-sufficient and the recommendation was I could have the Committee Secretary start and stop it.

There may also be reduced costs, as the stream thus far has not been exactly a ratings bonanza.

With the current interest level in the streaming service, there is an opportunity to examine cost savings in the monthly streaming fee by reducing the bandwidth, said Mr. Garbe. While some extra capacity is beneficial to ensure consistency of the streaming service, current demand has only required a small amount of the available bandwidth.

With the plan to broadcast more in place, the next step is to try to boost those figures by getting the word out and making sure the

public is aware that this service is available.

?We need to let them know in some way it is available to them and how to access it,? said Councillor Evelyn Buck, noting that when she was away from the table do to illness the meetings were cumbersome to access. ?I would like to [make sure] the greatest number of people benefit from the additional service that we are providing.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner agreed.

?This speaks to open, accessible and transparent government and is a good thing,? she said. ?I hope a lot of people are watching it and even if they aren't, it makes me feel good that it will be available for them to be able to.?