

Music festival pulls sponsorship request after Council debate

By Brock Weir

Music Aurora has pulled a request for financial support for their Aurora Summer Music Festival after a contentious debate around the Council table last week.

Despite receiving the backing of Aurora's Canada 150 Ad Hoc Committee, Council balked at Music Aurora's request for Town Sponsorship of the event, to the tune of \$16,000, while questioning Councillor John Abel's involvement in Music Aurora, the music advocacy group launched this past winter by the minds behind the Aurora Winter Blues Festival.

"Our ask is support of the Aurora Summer Music Festival as a Canada 150 Town-sponsored event, approval of the ask of \$16,000 supported by the Town's 150 Ad Hoc Committee where we had full support, but also support in the same report of Town Staff offer of communications, Parks and Recreation Cultural Services," said Jamie Macdonald, co-founder of Music Aurora, at last Tuesday's General Committee meeting, noting he would like to see the Festival become a legacy of Canada's sesquicentennial year.

Added Councillor Abel, who sits on the Music Aurora Board: "Typically, music events are great events to unite your community. We have a responsibility to ensure we have a vibrant and culturally rich Town and this is such a wonderful opportunity."

Proponents had the backing of both the Aurora Chamber of Commerce and Sport Aurora, both of whom delegated to Council to show the benefits such a festival would mean to Aurora, but it was largely for naught.

Council had other ideas. While they readily agreed to waive fees for the use of Town Park for the August Long Weekend, the \$16,000 was too rich for some as multiple community groups have come forward with proposals for their own Canada 150 events with price tags little more than the waiver of facility fees.

"I would love to support [your ask] but the problem is there are other community groups who are holding events as well and it becomes difficult on where you draw the line," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "We have to have a discussion, as a Council, to figure that out. It is not a slight on this committee. We need this type of event to occur in our Town and to add it to the 150 would be absolutely incredible."

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson, who hailed Councillor Abel and Music Aurora for their passion and enthusiasm for music.

"When I look at this event, the 150th and the history behind it, we as Council originally wanted all of the 150 celebrations to be supported by grant funding," he said. The conversation took a more heated turn when it was Councillor Paul Pirri's time to speak. He said he flummoxed that the \$16,000 ask of Council was even on the agenda due to Councillor Abel's involvement and that nobody had brought up what he saw as a potential "pecuniary interest in the matter."

"In the past, there was a criticism on Council as a whole that we got rid of that one music festival and I had heard rumours around Town that some of the reasons were so that we could start our own," said Councillor Pirri. "It was never my intent to start my own but lo and behold in front of us there is a request for another music festival where one of our members of Council has come asking for \$16,000. They have worked behind the scenes with staff and asked that reports be brought back and put onto the agenda specifically for this evening. I would hate to see through a [Freedom of Information Request] what else has been asked of staff or other communications that have gone on."

"This is wrong, plain and simple. I am surprised I am not the only one who is willing to vocalize that concern here tonight because it is wholeheartedly inappropriate for any of us to start an organization and turn it around and work with staff to bring something forward."

Although he might have been surprised he was "the only one?" he was the only one to that point. Councillor Pirri simply got the ball rolling with Mayor Geoff Dawe cautioning that under the rules only Councillor Abel is in a position to declare whether or not he has an interest in the matter.

"If it was myself, I would have stepped away from the table because I do believe it is a pecuniary interest," said Councillor Thompson. "By definition, a pecuniary interest really is the reasonable likelihood of financial loss or gain. The focus could have been just about the event [instead of] whether or not it is a conflict of interest for Councillor Abel because, it is true, it is up to him, but I do believe there is a financial risk. If this event fails, for whatever reason, then like any business or organization, the Board of Directors would be responsible to cover that loss. That is why I believe there is a conflict."

Councillor Abel, on the other hand, defended his position to stay at the table, arguing that court decisions have said there is a difference when Councillors are serving not-for-profit organizations. Both he and Mayor Dawe, he argued, are founding members of the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, which routinely receives money from Council, not to mention his involvement in the Aurora

Seniors' Centre.

‘It is an opportunity to celebrate,’ he said. ‘If you want to find a reason not to move forward and celebrate, that is fine. I have no issue with that. I did start back in 2014 to put a little bit of money each year forward so we wouldn't be sitting here debating the merits of where the funding comes from.’

From there, he turned his attention to the Aurora Winter Blues Festival's spearheading of the community viewing of the Tragically Hip's farewell concert to underscore the unifying power of what they are trying to achieve.

‘I bet there wasn't a Councillor in Canada who voted against that,’ said Councillor Abel, referencing the viewings which took place across the country last summer. ‘Well, with the exception of Councillor Pirri, but everyone enjoyed that celebration. Not being involved with the community, I can see where you don't get it, you're not in favour of it. You want to insinuate that I am doing something inappropriate and that's fine. You are but one vote. I would just say that we're making an effort to make a contribution to the wellbeing of our community.’

In making their decision, Council members took comfort in assurances the Festival would still be a go without their support. But, organizers formally rescinded their request on Friday.