

New bylaw should make Councillors more cautious at budget time: Gallo

By Brock Weir

Aurora is set this week to approve a new bylaw which would up the ante on the amount municipal staff can spend on previously budgeted items without having to come back to Council for further approval.

\$100,000 was the magic number decided as a spending limit by Councillors at last week's General Committee meeting, a number that was slashed in half from the staff-recommended \$200,000. If approved this week, it more than doubles the current spending limit, which has been set at \$50,000 for the better part of 15 years.

When the proposal first came before Council earlier this month, the \$200,000 figure was mulled and some Councillors expressed concern that moving ahead with that figure would be either 'delegating' or 'surrendering' the authority the public has invested in members of Council.

'Our role as Council is to maintain the financial integrity of the municipality and to ensure accountability for the operations,' said Councillor Michael Thompson at the time. 'I feel like I am delegating a little bit of my role and responsibility to staff. Staff do a great job and follow a great process, but I need a bit more of a compelling argument of turning that authority over to staff than [simply] better service levels and responding to better market conditions.'

Councillor Evelyn Buck went significantly further at the original meeting, stating that they were not delegating but 'surrendering' the authority 'people have given us to keep a close eye on what is being done.'

Staff argued that increasing the threshold to \$200,000, or even \$100,000, would 'reduce the time required to award a contract, which would provide a better service level to vendors and proponents' of Town-purchased goods and contract services. It would also, they argued, better equip the Town to respond to favourable market conditions, strike while the iron is hot when there is good pricing in the air, and bring Aurora up to the financial level of neighbouring municipalities such as Newmarket, which is set at \$250,000 and Richmond Hill at \$500,000.

By the time the recommendations came back for committee's final review last week in preparation for Council's ratification this Tuesday, similar sentiments were given as to not going all the way to \$200,000.

'It is easy enough to do the calculation that what the Town could by 10 years ago for \$50,000 has changed dramatically,' said Councillor Thompson. '[Using an inflation calculator] that came to somewhere around \$90,000 today. It think it is fair to raise that to \$100,000.'

Mayor Geoffrey Dawe agreed, saying he believed that going from \$50,000 to \$200,000 was a bit too ambitious at this point in time.

'I would also support the \$100,000, notwithstanding the various municipalities around us,' he said. 'I know that we're at \$50,000 now and that is a rather substantial jump. Perhaps we can look at [revising the number] a little more often than we have in the past, but I think \$100,000 is a reasonable number.'

The new measures passed Committee with only Councillor Wendy Gaertner voting against it. Councillor Buck was not at the meeting. Councillor Gaertner had a number of questions related to the nuts and bolts of the document including revised methods and criteria for purchasing environmental products and services.

In speaking in favour of the motion, Councillor John Gallo voiced his support, but also his hope that his fellow Councillors will be more cautious during budget time as fewer items that are budgeted for at that time, should this be approved, will be coming back to the table for further review.

?My only caveat is that, at least me personally, I hope everyone else at the table will need to spend a little more time during the budget process when we approve these budget items, when we realise they're not going to be coming back to us, to make sure we're comfortable with them,? he said.

?That has always been my saving grace whenever we have a budget item that I am teeter-tottering on. I know it is going to come back to us depending on what the amount is, and I will have more information and be able to make a more informed decision. It is going to remove some of that for me, I am going to be paying closer attention during the budget process.