

New Code of Ethics could soon be on the books

By Brock Weir

Aurora Council's new Code of Ethics comes forward this week for Councillors' consideration.

The new document will likely be thrashed out by Councillors at this Tuesday's General Committee meeting, in a new document which takes pieces from the Town's previous controversial Code of Conduct, which was formally rescinded by Council in May, and the existing Code of Ethics combining the elements into one new document under the 'ethics' banner.

This is the latest step in a long-brewing process to remove the Code of Conduct, which was implemented in the last Council term, with a new document with less stringent penalties.

The Code of Conduct was an issue of debate almost immediately since its inception with a rigid set of rules by which Councillors were required to conduct themselves. Along with these rigid rules, were a prescribed list of penalties Councillors could face if they ran afoul of the document. These included allowing members of Council and the public alike to lodge formal Code of Conduct complaints against Councillors, which would then be required to be reviewed by an Integrity Commissioner.

In the debates that surrounded whether the Code of Conduct should stay or go, advocates for a new Code of Ethics combining the best of both documents, argued that there were sufficient guidelines on the books to govern Council's behaviour. They cited the expense of retaining an integrity commissioner, or appointing one on an ad-hoc basis to review complaints, and the view that it 'distracted' from the business at hand. Councillor Michael Thompson argued that the public had already spoken out against the Code of Conduct during the 2010 election campaign.

'I think the issue is around the Integrity Commissioner and whether or not we need somebody to police the Members of Council,' he said. 'They felt that we were accountable to them and they were absolutely right. We are accountable to them every day.'

Councillors in favour of retaining the Code of Conduct included Councillors Chris Ballard, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo. In the ensuing debates, they argued members of the public want their Council members to be governed by a document that has 'some teeth' in making their elected representatives accountable to them, something they said the Code of Ethics does not provide.

'Without some sort of punishment for those who violate the Code, it will not be seen as credible by today's public who are unfortunately increasingly skeptical of their elected officials,' said Councillor Ballard.

Indeed, the document published Friday which could be up for Council's approval next week makes no mention of specific penalties for violating its contents. The revised Code of Ethics, said Town Clerk John Leach in his report to Council, sets the 'highest standards for personal and professional competence, integrity and impartiality to ensure public confidence and trust is maintained.'

It reiterates a Councillors' responsibility to the people, the principles of 'transparent, accessible and equitable' government, the divide between public responsibilities and private interest and keeping that divide very firm, and the privileges that are invested by the public to Council once they are elected to office.

The Code includes guidelines on the use of information which can occasionally be 'confidential or controversial', communications with members of the public and the media, relationships amongst themselves and members of the municipal staff team, accepting or declining gifts and hospitality, conflicts of interest, the use of Town Property, seeking public input, harassment amongst their ranks, staff, and members of the public and, ultimately, their roles and obligations as elected officials.

'Council members recognize their mandate incorporates tasks to include: fairly representing the diversity of community views in developing an overall strategy for the future of the Town; setting objectives and determining strategies to achieve Council's corporate objectives in the strategic plan; achieving sound financial management, planning, and accountability; being responsible

stewards for the Town's assets, services, public places, and natural environment; and being aware of and conversant with the statutory obligations imposed on Council as a whole as well as each individual Member of Council.?