

Public library funding should keep pace with population, Council agrees

By Brock Weir

Aurora has grown rapidly in many ways over the last 20 years, but one thing that hasn't grown in step with the population is Provincial funding to public libraries to meet community needs.

But that is something Aurora Council is looking to change, endorsing Councillor Harold Kim's motion and pleas from the Aurora Public Library to petition the new Provincial government to step up and help local libraries keep pace.

Councillor Kim's motion calls on the Province to recognize the contribution of local libraries within their communities and to cease a 20-year funding freeze to local libraries in an acknowledgement of the services they offer to residents.

Following Council's approval, the Town will urge the province to restore adequate and appropriate funding going forward and keeping it aligned to the consumer price index.

The objective of the motion is to send a communication and let the new government know that given their current mandate to create efficiencies we hope that, as part of the Library, this is not going to be one of those inefficient things, said Councillor Kim.

[The Library] is quite efficient, so we just want them to ensure that the increase in budget is not changed and that is essentially the spirit of the motion.

The motion received a strong endorsement from staff at the Aurora Public Library, who attended the last Council meeting in a show of support.

Speaking on their behalf was Jill Foster, whose term as CEO of the Aurora Public Library (APL) came to a close at the end of last month upon her retirement.

While public libraries, she said, received the bulk of their support from municipalities, the Provincial Government does provide annual grants to libraries.

The Public Library Operating Grant is based on municipal population, or at least it used to be, said Ms. Foster. While many municipalities in Ontario have experienced significant population growth in the last 20 years, the Province's annual grant has not kept pace with this growth. In fact, the provincial grant in support of public library operations has remained unchanged since 1995. Census data indicates that Aurora's population in 1996 was approximately 34,860. Today, according to figures I received from the Town, as of late 2017, our population is 63,300, a 45 per cent increase. Aurora Public Library is serving a much larger and diversified population than in 1995 and the requirement to enhance our service level grows each year.

APL has been well supported by this and previous Councils, make no mistake about that. But most years when I appear before you with the Library's request for an operating funding for the upcoming year, I am questioned about the amount of support the Library receives from the Province. Although the Province also underwrites the cost of our extensive interlibrary loan delivery system that allows public libraries to share their resources across the province, as well as providing some ad-hoc funding in support of technology, our annual grant amount has been capped at \$44,140 since 1995.

Public libraries and their boards have lobbied for many years for a reasonable increase in the Provincial grant to more closely reflect the population served. These efforts were finally rewarded in the March 28, 2018 Provincial Budget with the previous government's inclusion of an investment of \$1 million over three years to public libraries and First Nation library funding. With the recent election comes the potential for decisions to be reversed.

It is crucial that the new government honour the hard-won commitment made to public libraries to provide a provincial support at a level consistent with the population served. The Library Board endorsed Councillor Kim's motion at the June meeting and is hopeful that Aurora Town Council will make a formal request to the Provincial government that it honour the adequate and appropriate funding allocated to public and First Nation libraries in its March 2018 Budget.

Following Ms. Foster's remarks, Councillor Sandra Humfries showed her support for their effort, stating it was shocking to see there had been no increase in nearly 25 years.

Ms. Foster was also asked to outline where this funding freeze has led to library shortfalls.

Library staff are very adept at stretching a dollar and do as much as they can with what they have, she replied. We have become very good at it over the years. I think our pressure point is probably the newcomers to Aurora and also trying to keep pace with technology because what we bought five years ago is probably not cutting edge anymore.

People expect the best. If we're going to be a technological hub and teaching facility for people, then we have to have the best equipment. That is probably where our most difficult areas are. I have to say this community, this Council supports the Library very well. I think compared to some municipalities we have had more of a cushion and less crisis on our hands, but had the funds that we

should have had for the additional 40,000 people who aren't included in that provincial grant amount, we could be doing more. ?