

Service Level Review needs to 'take an extra step', say disappointed Councillors

By Brock Weir

Members of the public should get a sense of whether they are getting the best bang for their tax buck, according to some Councillors who have expressed 'disappointment' with Aurora's service level review.

Aurora began a service level review earlier this year to look at how tax dollars were being spent by municipal programs, as well as programs within Town Hall and departments.

The results focused on collaboration and cost recovery, following what consultants described as favourable feedback from Councillors and Town staff.

Going forward, however, a key to success will be collaborating with York Region's Northern Six (N6) municipalities - Aurora, King Township, Newmarket, Georgina, Whitchurch-Stouffville, and East Gwillimbury - on common objectives.

'One of our recommendations we have been exploring is potentially expanding the N6 Cooperation,' said consultant Ian Smith. 'You are already collaborating on service delivery' and could do more.'

This summer, Mr. Smith's report indicated Aurora residents are currently paying a little bit more over people in comparable municipalities for their municipal services. Where Aurora might be on the hook for more, they are also getting more for their buck, they reported. This is particularly prevalent in the area of Parks and Recreation which not only costs the Aurora significantly more than other municipalities, but also has a much better return on revenue.

A big question as Aurora moves forward is to consider whether this is a standard the Town wants to maintain, said Mr. Smith.

'We want to make sure as you go forward is looking at the level of service [provided] in certain areas and if there is an opportunity to adjust those service levels,' he said. 'What we found overall is the Town is doing a number of things very well' there were also opportunities to perhaps improve efficiency and effectiveness going forward.'

At last week's Council meeting, however, some Councillors expressed a degree of disappointment for what was not in the report. Among them was Councillor Michael Thompson who said more time should have been spent on ways Aurora could innovate to provide better service delivery for residents.

Citing earlier ways in which Aurora had been singled out for its innovation, he said he wanted to see ways other municipalities have stepped up their game and exceeded earlier standards.

'It didn't go that extra step,' said Councillor Thompson. 'It didn't really bring [what we can do with 'discretionary' services] to the table. Maybe there are opportunities to [approach these services] differently and still provide them at the same or better service.'

'Undertaking the service level review wasn't just identifying how we are doing, but to present us with ideas and things to debate about new approaches and things we can talk about at budget time. I don't see a lot of that stuff coming out about the service level review that will infiltrate into our budget discussions.'

The report, he argued, should enable Council to look at services listed as 'discretionary' and lay the groundwork for a report in 2014 or 2015 to see if Aurora is on the right track with those services, or see if they can be done another way.

Councillor John Gallo said he was similarly disappointed with the report, not only for the lack of innovation but what he said he saw as a lack of engagement. Councillors should have been asked to play a bigger role in the process above and beyond interviews with each member and where other communities are being innovative, he said he assumed their Councillors had more of a direct hand in the finished product.

"I don't feel this side of the table is engaged enough in these types of projects," said Councillor Gallo, noting his primary goal was to align citizen expectations with what is actually provided by the Town. "How did we gauge citizen expectations and compare and contrast what we're doing with what the residents want? I don't think this report did that in any way.

"You can analyse what we do and put some numbers to what we do, and that is great, but in its primary purpose and goal, we didn't analyse residents' expectations. Engaging with the consultant from our eyes would have been an interesting exercise."

Other Councillors, on the other hand, were satisfied with what has come forward. The report as written is a good foundation upon which to build to go those next steps and focusing in on what needs to be done. Councillor John Abel, for instance, said he didn't think it was the role of Council to scrutinize what each municipal department is doing for things like efficiencies and this report as a good learning tool.

"[The report] gives me some clarity and focus on strategic priorities," said Councillor Abel. "It explains our role going forward. I would like to take what has been given to us and would like to move forward with some direction to staff [on] what they can do over the next year."

Added Mayor Dawe: "I was looking for the services Aurora provides, where we're good, where we can pick up our socks, and I was very impressed with the level of services that are in this document. I got a good sense of what we do, what we offer, and what it is costing us. It is information we have not had before and I think it is an excellent base to build on."