

Staff expenses put under microscope at Town Hall

By Brock Weir

Are Aurora's municipal staff accountable to the public, or to the Council that hires them?

This was a question grappled with last week by Councillors on whether they needed to get more involved with how directors of municipal departments make expense claims. The discussions sprang out of discussions related to Councillors and their own expenses, but some Councillors argued that this extra layer of oversight should apply to Town staff as well.

"Staff, by letter of the law, are not accountable to members of the public, but they are accountable to the [administration]," said Councillor John Gallo, suggesting reports on directors and managers' expenses be presented privately to Council. "We are accountable to the public and we implement public policy that drives how this corporation works and we are accountable to staff and their expenses through the budget process."

This idea, however, was defeated 5-4, with Councillors Chris Ballard, Evelyn Buck, and Wendy Gaertner supporting the motion. For them, it was a matter of being fully accountable to the public.

"I think for Council to be able to be accountable to the public, we should be aware of what is happening," said Councillor Evelyn Buck. "If it is appropriate for the public to have access on a regular basis to the expenses of Councillors then it is appropriate for Councillors to have access to staff [expenses] because we are the ones who are directly accountable to the public and the public has to depend on us. It is okay for us and therefore the same principle applies to staff."

This sentiment was shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner. She rejected suggestions put forward earlier in the meeting that this would put Councillors in the position of being able to "throw staff under the bus", but rather was sound governance.

"I believe that we do need to be responsible and look to staff's expenses. If something [was] a big issue and there was misspending on the part of staff, the public would look to us as the people holding the bag."

Municipal Staff currently are able to attend conferences and expenses are allotted out of a nominal pot. Councillors in favour of this disagreed with suggestions made by Councillor Michael Thompson that asking for further reports on how this money is being spent was akin to "micromanagement."

He argued that Council "empowers staff to make decisions" and it is their responsibility to make sure the money is spent wisely.

"That level of micromanagement under- mines their authority we give them to do their job. Their role is that the money in their department is spent wisely. To micromanage this process, it is not a far leap to then say, "Let me see your work plan and let me see that you're doing a full day's work."

From Councillor Paul Pirri's perspective, Councillors are in a much different position to staff when it comes to the public. It is Council's responsibility to receive the criticisms as they're the ones who set policies.

"We allocate funds for staff to use," he said. "If we don't expect them to use those funds, and we don't want them to use those funds, then let's not give them the budget."

Rounding the discussion were Councillors Sandra Humfries and, finally, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. Both expressed a similar viewpoint that this is not Council's responsibility to oversee, but that of Neil Garbe, Aurora's Chief Administrative Officer over his administration.

"We have directors who are accountable to the CAO," said Councillor Humfries. "They have the budgets set every year. They are

asked to reduce the budgets and do the best they can in the most efficient way to manage a department. I don't want to micromanage the directors. That's not what I am here for. I am here to manage the corporations as best we can through the information that we receive from a Council perspective.?

Added Mayor Dawe: ?I firmly believe this is micro management. It is not an area that we should go down. This is why we have Mr. Garbe. There's four levels of signatures on expense reports, depending on the amount, and at least four people who are signing off. If we need to look at those then we don't trust those four people.

?I take offense at the comments that we're somehow lax in our duty in not analysing what staff spend. We are directors of a public corporation. I defy you to find any other public corporation that sits there and looks at their senior staff or anyone else's expenses.?