

Town-wide wi-fi access program to be examined by staff

Municipal staff have been tasked with looking at various models to implement wi-fi access across Aurora.

Council last week gave the green light to a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas asking for a report back on the possibility of introducing subsidized wi-fi service across Aurora, stating the need for a connected community is greater now than ever before with people working and learning from home.

"We have seen a lot of residents where they don't have access to internet and we're seeing more and more that the internet and broadband in general shouldn't be a luxury, it should be a necessity," said Mayor Mrakas. "To me, this is a necessity, this is a service that our residents need, and I think especially moving forward it is something we need to provide."

While the "ultimate goal" would be to provide Town-wide wi-fi access, there are some steps that can be taken along the way, he added, referencing municipal facilities and outdoor properties like parks.

"Far too many times I have heard stories of children that are now doing online learning where they are having to get into their parents' car or walk over to their nearest coffee shop and sit outside with their computer so they can connect to wi-fi and get their work done. To me, that is unacceptable. I think as a Town our responsibility is to make sure everyone has equal access and with more things being online, from filling out medical forms, to documents, to doing your bank statements more needs to be done in providing basic wi-fi service for our residents as a necessity."

While the idea received a mixed reception at the table, Council members agreed that, after raising several concerns, a report into the possibilities was a good step forward.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, for instance, said she "loved the idea" with regards to learning, banking, and other basic needs, she asked that further information on "security implications" be included in the report. Councillor Rachel Gilliland also sought assurances that whatever the Town came up with wasn't "doing double duty" with initiatives explored by other levels of government and the report included implications on the taxpayer.

"Are you saying you want us, the taxpayer, to be subsidizing wi-fi for the people in our Town who can't afford wi-fi?" she asked, with Mayor Mrakas responding it is about "providing a service level that our residents would expect."

Councillor John Gallo also said he was prepared to support the motion, but said there were a lot of unanswered questions that needed to be addressed before he could support any concrete program.

"I want facts and statistics because, if we're trying to solve a problem, I want to make sure we're solving a problem that exists and if this is the best solution to solve that problem," he said. "There is no question that in today's day and age, it is a necessity, but I need to understand the issue and whether or not this is the best way to solve [it]. If we do this, [does this mean] everybody cancels their wi-fi at home and logs onto the Town? I don't think we have the answer to that, but I am looking forward to seeing what comes out of it and what other municipalities are doing."

For Councillor Harold Kim, in addition to the above-mentioned concerns, it was a matter of cost. A report coming forward should have various options, including price structures and options for public-private partnerships.

"Whenever we talk about wi-fi, the first thing that comes to mind are services to low-income and under-served populations of our municipality," he said, also noting that Town-wide wi-fi could bolster civic engagement. "In this day and age of the pandemic where people use and need internet not only for education but also for medical reasons, to talk to one's family doctor, the internet has become very sensitive in terms of a much-needed integral service."

Just before the unanimous vote, Mayor Mrakas said it has long been mentioned at the Association of Municipalities Ontario and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities that wi-fi is no longer a luxury; as a necessity, he said it is something that should be provided by a municipality if it is cost-effective and makes sense from a financial standpoint.

We provide services to our residents, he said. This is another service. It has become more apparent that it is a need, then it becomes more apparent it is a service we need to take a hard look at how we can provide this service to our residents so all residents have access.

I think what we'll come to learn is this is not about providing access for people to stream shows, watch movies, or any of that; this is to provide access so people can read news, submit forms online, and [perform] just basic web browsing and messenger apps so they can stay connected. Ultimately, the more engaged, the more informed our public is and our residents are, the more active and the more knowledgeable they are and the better off we are as a community. That is our ultimate goal: to make sure our community is the best community. This is what we'll achieve by moving forward in this direction. I am looking forward to getting answers to all of the questions you have provided today and have staff come back to us [with answers and] we can move forward in a positive direction.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter