

Workload has outgrown part-time job, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

Representing Aurorans on Council might technically be a part-time job, but the reality is much different, say Council members. As such, elected officials are questioning whether they are being paid enough to do the job and whether their positions should, at some point be considered full time.

Talks stemmed from a report before Council last week from Aurora's Governance Review Committee which recommended an ultimately-approved change to how Councillors are paid.

At present, one-third of a Councillor's existing salary is deemed tax free under the Municipal Act, but changes at the Federal level sparked a change all the way down the line.

The Federal Government recently announced intention to eliminate the current one-third tax free provisions for elected officials at all levels of government, said the Committee in its report to Council. Although no regulation or legislation to do so has been introduced [the Committee considered if the tax exemption was eliminated] whether the base compensation should be increased to offset the lower net take-home pay which would otherwise result.

They also considered, they said, the issue of transparency. A one-third tax exemption could be considered contrary to transparency, they argued, and eliminating it altogether would help bolster accountability.

The Committee believes that increased transparency and accountability is a worthy goal and recommends ending the one-third tax free treatment of Council compensation, they said. The Committee believes that the increase in transparency and accountability is of higher value than the relatively minor budget impacts of increasing Council compensation to offset the additional taxation impact to their take home pay.

Thus, following Council's approval last week, they will lose their tax exemption but their pay will be boosted so they won't see an impact.

Nevertheless, for Councillor Wendy Gaertner, this did not go far enough.

I have been on Council since 2003 and Council has never had a raise, she said, adding there have been Cost of Living increases over the years. Since then the workload has increased tremendously. I know some people around this table are doing full time jobs and this is a part time job, and some of us are doing this as a part time job. The workload has increased and I know everyone around the table will agree with me on that. I would make a bid that this Committee or Council should review [salaries].

While Mayor Geoff Dawe noted that this was a matter considered and ultimately turned down by the whole of Council in the last term, Councillor Sandra Humfries said the workload does go above and beyond what someone in a regular part-time position would do, particularly when it comes to meeting the needs of residents which might crop up during the day.

I know there are nine of us, but if you really want to do the role the way it has been done, with the way the workload has increased, I often feel really bad about not doing what I can and taking it to that next level, meeting a resident during the day and going to their issues and meeting with staff to go to their homes or wherever their concerns are, she said.

Councillor Jeff Thom offered similar thoughts: It is a full time job you try to cram into part time hours and we could all probably get to more if we had more time. It is really the compensation piece that is most important.

Most agreed that there were two questions on the table: compensation and whether or not Council should be a full time job for all members, beyond the Mayor.

For Councillor Michael Thompson, however, the ship of moving to full-time positions sailed after the last election.

Under the current structure of having eight Councillors I am supportive of it staying part time, he said. If we had acted earlier on in the term on the referendum question of reducing Council from eight to six, perhaps we would have a different conversation.

Councillor John Abel added that compensation needs to reflect what we value the Councillors' role as. When you multiply the base salary of approximately \$30,000 by eight, the resulting figure comes close to the salary of the top municipal employee.

For the role that we carry out to set policies and all the work, and be that representative face for the residents, that is not a fair compensation, he said. I think if we put a better package together we might attract a larger and more qualified field. No one can live on a councillor's wage, not in this Town and likely not in any town. I think it is our responsibility to put that forward so we are getting and attracting and compensating for the value of the work.

Concluded Councillor Gaertner: We can compare ourselves to other jobs but this job holds a lot of responsibilities and I think it is respectful to consider giving us a raise for the amount of work and responsibility that we hold. Full or part time is a whole other subject.