

Aurora's twin city agreement to be revived with visit to Sweden

Aurora's near-40-year 'twin' relationship with the Leksand, Sweden, is set to be rekindled this year as Mayor Tom Mrakas, and potentially municipal staff members, plan a trip to Leksand to exchange views and best practices.

Council last week approved a plan for the Mayor to visit the Town's Twin City, a relationship which was formed in 1976, along with two staff members to be on the 'delegation' but a successful amendment from Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo closed the door on municipal funds being used on the trip.

In a report before Council by Lisa Hausz, Manager of Economic Development and Policy for the Town of Aurora, the twinning agreement was 'the result of relations formed through several, official and non-official visits infused with diplomacy, sport and culture.'

'In 1972, the Aurora Toyota Midget Hockey Team visited Leksand for the first time,' said Hausz. 'Since then, both Towns have been exchanging invitations to strengthen their relationship. Leksand teams and dignitaries visited Aurora between 1974 and 1975. In 1976, the towns officially became 'twins' during an official visit to Aurora by Leksand officials. Since then, there have been several sports-related visits between the twin towns. The last official visit to Leksand by Aurora dignitaries [was] in 1994. Leksand dignitaries last visited Aurora in 2017.'

Since then, the Town hosted the Swedish Women's Hockey Team ahead of the IIHF last year.

A visit back to Leksand would be a 'unique opportunity' to exchange views on 'managing economic, social, and environmental changes and gain insight into sustainable urban growth.'

Initiatives to be discussed include Vision Zero, a program that aims towards zero traffic fatalities; Viable Cities, an effort to reach 'climate neutrality by 2023 with practical, scalable solutions'; Blue-Green City Lab 'a living lab that tests and evaluates new technologies and solutions that mitigate climate change weather events'; and technology solutions, particularly in the automotive and waste management sectors.

While the report notes Mayor Mrakas will not be seeking municipal dollars to fund his part of the delegation, it added two Council members could potentially be a part of it, along with some staff from Aurora and the Region of York.

At the start of last week's meeting, opposition was expressed at the podium by resident John Hartman who delegated to Council. He said he was 'struggling with embracing the benefits' of a five-person delegation and questioned what benefits have been realized from this twinning agreement.

In remarks which he said had some degree of sarcasm, Hartman said similarities between Aurora and Leksand extend to hockey, snow, and a smaller-town feel.

'Sweden's decision-making and form of government is dramatically different from what we have here in Canada. How Sweden approaches, adopts and embraces innovation is very different,' he said. 'Admittedly, they're global leaders in sustainability and environmental protection but those are on a national scale, not on a local scale like Aurora. Given our last visit was 30 years ago as documented in the report, there must be other towns that are more aligned to where we could learn right here in Canada or North America. Why would we consider sending an elected official who may or may not be with us in three years? Don't staff help create, drive, manage and operationalize our programs?'

When it came time for Council to discuss the report, opposition was voiced by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said she was 'surprised' with the report 'at a time when we're trying to pinch pennies.'

?In relation to climate? and I am sure that we could definitely find some examples in our own backyard of Ontario where we could learn by example,? she said, citing annual conferences at the Provincial and National level that afford homegrown municipalities to exchange views. It is an opportunity, it is an unfortunate timing, however I just feel this is not necessary and there are other ways we can collaborate and communicate, especially with technology today. I think it is great that they came here, how wonderful it is, but I just can't see this being as valuable as what is being presented.

?I hope my colleagues agree that we shouldn't be moving forward with any trips across the country and climate ? the funny irony is let's hop on a plane and CO2 everything and go to another country to learn this model? we can probably do this in our own backyard.?

Support for nixing the trip in its entirety was lacking around the table, but Councillor Gallo's motion to limit municipal funding for it was approved on a vote of 6 ? 1 with Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson dissenting.

?I would agree with the sentiment that any time we're discussing initiatives such as this there needs to be a process by which we can show the value and what the benefit is, not just to the community but to the Town as well,? he said, noting that \$20,000 is allocated in the municipal budget each year for members of Council to attend the conferences Councillor Gilliland described. ?There is a responsibility on each one of us if we choose to go to those conferences to go back and show the value to our residents?that there was a benefit in spending that money and I would expect the same thing from any trip to anywhere.

?In my conversations with the CAO, the intent was that there would be a report coming back by staff if they were to attend to illustrate what was discussed, the value, the benefits, how the relationship would continue on, and so the attempt would be to justify the costs. Again, I agree with the sentiment, but I still think there is potential and value in considering it.?

The report was approved unanimously following Councillor Gallo's amendment.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter