

Budget talks included battle over training

By Brock Weir

Hammering out last year's Budget, Aurora Council put the amount of money they allocate for the ongoing training of staff members under the microscope and they once again dusted off their arguments for this year's budget, putting off a proposed \$70,000 boost to the program to offset next year's tax increase.

Meeting in a Special General Committee meeting in December, Council considered the proposed increase, which would have made a total budget allocation of just over \$360,000.

The move, which was put forward by CAO Doug Nadorozny, was supported by Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillors John Abel and Wendy Gaertner in a new system devised this year of prioritizing budget pressures on a ranked ballot. Other Council members, with the exception of Councillor Paul Pirri, who ranked it a 5/10, placed this near the bottom of their priorities.

Leading the pack among the trio of supporters, however, was Councillor Abel, who said training and development is "one of the best investments" Council can make.

"I got a lot of feedback from residents that they did not go along with the idea and they thought it was in the best interest of the taxpayers to curtail and cut off training and development," he said. "They do believe in getting the most for their dollar, but certainly not in your staff. One idea by one employee can save hundreds of thousands of dollars, which is what you want to do for your employees. You want to engage them, enrich them, and enable them and training and development through any and every vocation is one of the best ways to do it. I am all for taking measures to limit spending and getting value, but certainly not with our staff and training and development. I appreciate the value and it echoes through all municipalities."

While Councillor Pirri stressed this was not a matter of cutting the training and development budget, but rather an increase that was being considered, other Council members questioned the merits of the proposal. Councillor Tom Mrakas, for instance, said it was a matter of seeking efficiencies within the budget.

"I don't think anyone sitting at this table doesn't want to see our staff being trained and developed to their best of the abilities, but then again we also look to hire the best," he said. "It doesn't mean we don't train them or develop them further, but it is to look for those efficiencies."

Citing a report before Council showing Aurora comes in just after the much larger City of Vaughan when it comes to training and development budgets and other municipalities ranking much higher, he said this indicates Aurora's status quo is largely on target. "[It begs the question] is everyone else doing it right and Vaughan and us are doing it wrong?" he said. "Is Vaughan doing it wrong? Is Vaughan not training and developing its staff properly? Or are they doing it right and maybe everyone else is doing it right and we're spending too much. [I don't think Vaughan] is doing it wrong. How can they do it at that price and we can't? I think we need to be more efficient in how we spend money."

Mayor Geoff Dawe, however, said it was not a direct comparison.

"Percentages can be a little misleading because the Vaughan salary budget is substantially larger than ours, whereas East Gwillimbury's budget is probably substantially less than ours," said Mayor Dawe. "I suspect Vaughan can get different efficiencies in how they spend their money than we would [with the size]."

In discussing the matter further, Councillor Michael Thompson questioned the relatively high employee turnover rate at Town Hall. Over the last 13 months, 29 out of 200 employees have gone, which he described as a "significant number."

While Mr. Nadorozny chalked this up to the "competitive" local job environment in the municipal realm, Councillor Thompson said this gave him pause on further training funding.

"Chances are you might invest in that employee but they may be gone in a year and so there is not necessarily a payback for the organization, it is an advancement of the individual," he said.