

Grant for food and culture festival sparks Council debate

**By
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A last minute request for \$5,000 in public dollars to support an incoming Food & Culture Festival this September sparked Council debate last week.

At issue was an amendment by Councillor Harold Kim to his motion to establish the Aurora Food & Culture Festival this fall, an amendment which asked Council to approve funding to an upset limit of \$5,000 from Council Contingency funds to event organizers Sports Horizons Inc. for the operation of the event.

The \$5,000 would be for marketing purposes, said Councillor Kim, but this request at the eleventh hour raised a few eyebrows amongst his colleagues.

Councillor Rachel Gilliland led the questioning, wondering if Councillor Kim was confident \$5,000 will help make the event a success. Councillor John Gallo, on the other hand, approached the issue from a different angle, objecting not to the Festival itself, but the timing of Councillor Kim's amendment.

"I am a big promoter of food and culture and the value that brings to a community and I was in support of this motion up to the amendment," he said. "I am quite surprised this is the first time we're hearing of an ask for any funding. I have literally minutes to decide whether to spend \$5,000 of taxpayer money on this with virtually no plan in front of me. My comfort level for that is not very high. While I can appreciate what's being done and I value it, I will not be supporting the amendment because I do not have a plan in front of me. I have no idea other than what Councillor Kim just said [of] how the \$5,000 will be spent.

"Had I had known beforehand, had something been brought to our attention beforehand, I probably would have considered it. To me, this is something that needs a little bit more planning, perhaps for next year, and a stronger rationale for spending that kind of money at the ninth hour, at a Council meeting, in an amendment. However, should the motion be moved [without the amendment] I am in full support of that."

Replied Councillor Kim: "There will be full reporting. When any organization I am involved with is spending taxpayer money, there will be full accountability and full detail in terms of where the money is being spent."

Debate, however, continued after Council voted 5 ? 2 in favour of the amendment, with Councillors Gallo and Wendy

Gaertner among the opposition.

Councillor Kim said he 'understood' that process was important, but 'what's more important than process is what's good for the end customers?' in this case, the residents, he said.

'Given the tight timelines we were given [from February to March] to have another country get involved and say, 'We want to spend tens of thousands of dollars into your municipality.' It is not Richmond Hill with a population of 200,000 or Vaughan, it is Aurora. They are going to bring their master chef, award-winning jazz musicians, dancers, out of their own pocket.

Leverage, he added, was a key consideration and cited recent Council decisions to grant the Aurora Cultural Centre thousands for their new Kaleidoscope project will take their programming into local schools, as an example of a late-in-the-game funding request.

For a \$5,000 grant, there will be 'tens of thousands' of dollars worth of free cultural exposure with Barbados 'taking a risk on your municipality with a big heart.'

'To say there is no detailed budget, that it is not following a certain process, I think from a pragmatic perspective I don't understand why that question is being brought up,' said Councillor Kim.

But Councillor Gaertner had more questions.

'It is not that I don't share Councillor Kim's enthusiasm, but it has taken a long time to get these [funding request] processes in place and to get Councils to follow them,' she said. 'Process is what is good for our community and our taxpayers and, to me, anyway, it is very important that we follow process. I will have to vote against it because of that.

'You can't pick and choose. You follow the process for the long-term benefit of the taxpayer and it doesn't matter if it is \$1,000 or \$5,000 or more, I think it is wrong that we don't follow the process.'

These Council members were in the minority, with others offering their enthusiasm.

Councillor Sandra Humfries, for instance, said it was a good investment on behalf of residents, while Councillor Rachel Gilliland said a festival such as this would go towards bringing Aurora's east and west sides together.

'I think this is something the community can really, really benefit from,' she said.

While Councillor Michael Thompson said he

was concerned that some of the financial details weren't before Council, he was prepared to put his trust in Councillor Kim.

I do have [tremendous respect] for Councillor Kim, he's on the committee, and I believe he will provide all members of Council with the information we seek prior to the event happening, said Councillor Thompson. I trust in him he will ensure the money is put to good use and will be ever-mindful that at the end of the day it is taxpayers' dollars. I am giving him a lot of latitude in doing so, but I trust he will come back with that budgetary report and fulfil some of those concerns prior to the event happening.

Added Mayor Mrakas: This \$5,000 is near nothing compared to the return we will get, the people that will come to our community for this event will, in turn, come back and return, visit our restaurants, visit our shops, shop around Town, start to become part of the community and see the great community we are. This is an excellent opportunity for our Town to do something incredible for our residents and do something incredible. I think it is a great use of taxpayers dollars.

Near the end of the debate, Councillor Gallo summed up his feelings by saying he was hopeful it will be true. Unfortunately, they are just words into a microphone.

I have nothing to rely on, he concluded. Had there been something sent to us, some type of memo report, something that could have been shared with us with all of those details, wonderful. But I would love to support this, but I have nothing to rely on other than a last-minute request to spend \$5,000 of taxpayer money I have no plan for.