

## Public could be able to keep tabs on Council expenses more often

**By Brock Weir**

Aurora residents could be able to keep more up-to-date track of which Councillors are spending what through the course of the year.

Council is set to approve a committee recommendation this Tuesday which could see more detailed reporting on what Councillors are expensing to the town on a more regular basis. As things stand now, these details are reported annually by the Town Treasurer ? 2012's were presented last month ? but if last week's recommendation goes through, they will now be reported twice yearly.

The move was a bit of a compromise following a lengthy and, at times, heated debate over expense reporting. Some Councillors wanted reporting to stay the same on an annual basis, but others called on quarterly year-to-date figures being released to the public.

The ball got rolling on looking at potential ways to change the status quo in January with a special Council meeting to go over the options.

Out of the nine municipalities, Aurora, King, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury, and Georgina report their expenses in their Council agendas on an annual basis. Markham and Vaughan, on the other hand, provide monthly year-to-date reports, and Newmarket follows on a quarterly basis.

?I was hoping we would move things forward rather than stay with the status quo, or a slightly expanded format,? said Councillor Ballard on Town Treasurer Dan Elliott's latest report on expenses which were broken down into more detail than in years past. ?I think the policy needs to include provisions that would have expenses budgeted and tracked per Councillor, that expenses by Council members be reported quarterly and year-to-date, including details?on each transaction, by description categorization, much like the municipalities around us.

?It is my firm belief, and certainly from the people I talk to, they want to be able to see how we're spending this money and many of them see it as a way of tracking how we are spending the larger budget.?

Councillors Wendy Gaertner and John Gallo agreed with him, with the former stating it would be a welcome move ?into the area of more transparency and accessibility? and the latter stating quarterly would be ?a bit more reasonable? than monthly reporting.

Mr. Elliott's 2012 numbers came this year in a fresh format with a detailed breakdown on how Councillors spent their money, including which Councillors attended what conferences, mileage claimed, and other categorizations. This, he said, was in response to some of the concerns raised throughout the course of the last six months by Council.

?I did have a category for alcohol, for example, because I know that was a bit of a topic with this Council, with some members of the community, and the media (see below),? he said. ?I wanted to show that was very clear that was separated out and considered.?

Frequency of reporting, nevertheless, was still the primary issue at hand. While Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, for instance, said that nobody had an issue with being open and transparent, it was important to look at things in the wider context of Councils past.

?I think we're reporting out a whole lot more than previous Councils,? he said, making a motion that Mr. Elliott gather up previous expense reports for the last several years, ?so we can get a sense as to where we sit in the overall scheme of thing.?

That was something Councillor Michael Thompson said he had already done and he said he agreed there was ?even less information provided in those reports from prior Councils? than what was approved last month

?We have taken a step forward,? said Councillor Thompson.

?There is concern that we seem to be going wild with our spending and I think that would be appropriate to compare that to what is reasonable over the last two terms,? added Mayor Dawe, calling on the previous reports to be broken down as they now are by category.

This, however, didn't fly, and Council opted to go the simpler route of just having a summary of the previous Councils compiled into a memo.

?I don't really see the purpose of that,? said Councillor John Gallo of the suggestion for retroactive reports. ?I have no problem if the director sends us the annual reports for the past five years, I don't care, and we can analyse them ourselves, but to have staff spend time on that makes absolutely no sense to me and is a complete waste of their time. If we want to know what those are, pull a report and take a look. They are all on the website. There is nothing untoward about that and it is a complete waste of time.?

If the recommendation are passed as-is this week, Council expenses will be reported semi-annually, with the last two years of expenses re-formatted with greater detail.