

Council considers future N6 collaborations

By Angela Gismondi

There was a lot of discussion surrounding the current and future collaboration of the Northern 6 (N6) at the committee of the whole meeting March 23.

In 2007 the Northern 6 municipalities of York Region, including King, Aurora, East Gwillimbury, Georgina, Newmarket and Whitchurch-Stouffville collectively entered into a ten-year waste collection contract. The award-winning contract was the first N6 initiative in which the municipalities collaborated with one another to leverage the economies of scale for the benefit of cost containment of municipally delivered services. Recent collaborations among the N6 includes sharing of internal audit resources, employee benefits review, joint training, learning and development activities, cross-municipal working groups and joint procurement on insurance and waste collection.

N6 Program Manager Glenn Lang gave council an overview of the N6 Shared Services Study which identifies priority areas for partnership, collaboration and shared service opportunities among the N6 municipalities. He updated council on the recent initiative undertaken by the N6 Chief Administrative Officers (CAO) to assist with identifying new opportunities for projects in support of ongoing collaboration.

Each of the N6 municipalities contributed to the secondment of Lang from the Region of York, to assist staff from each of the various municipalities to develop, document, evaluate and prioritize ideas. He explained he has spent the last year identifying new opportunities for collaboration and potential future initiatives to build upon the success of the N6 partnership. The study looks beyond the procurement of waste collection and insurance which are already shared by the N6 and focuses on future partnerships such as shared service delivery, the pooling of resources and the consolidation of services.

Lang, along with senior staff, conducted a comprehensive evaluation and came up with 51 preliminary ideas. The CAOs looked at cost efficiencies, service improvements, how easily the ideas could be implemented and maximizing the use of existing resources. One of the priority areas for N6 partnerships determined through the study was to continue joint initiatives in waste management and insurance. The study also suggested the N6 explore a joint approach for Emerald Ash Borer tree removal and replacement and joint procurement opportunities for many public works services which are currently being contracted out. Other potential collaborations include exploring joint delivery of animal shelter and animal control services, sharing specialized equipment, facilities and maintenance expertise and to develop a common asset management approach.

In terms of the next steps, Lang will be sharing the presentation and the findings of the study with the councils of the N6 municipal partners and will develop a work plan that details the particulars for each priority idea and how to successfully implement each initiative.

Councillor Avia Eek was pleased with the presentation.

‘We are very excited about N6 initiatives,’ said Eek. ‘The more we work together, the more we can get accomplished.’

Councillor Bill Cober pointed out that the partnership has saved the Township significant dollars over the years \$1 million over 10 years and one per cent on the tax rate.

‘It’s a huge deal,’ said Cober. ‘The N6 savings equalled so much to the Township and it still does. Anything that is a savings to our tax base is what we’re all about.’

Mayor Steve Pellegrini said he supports the N6 partnership but wants to be careful about expanding too far.

‘I am a big advocate of the N6 and what they do,’ said Pellegrini, adding he has one concern about the bureaucracy becoming too large and complex. ‘I would have one word of caution bigger is not always better. Sometimes being small is great. You’re a little more nimble and you can get things done quicker.’

A separate item on the Committee of the Whole agenda directed staff to work collaboratively on the preparation of a new N6 waste collection contract, which would last for a period of eight years.

Pellegrini was concerned that the Township would have the same issues with the waste collection service that they’ve had in the past few years.

‘Initially Turtle Island had the contract no issues. They sold the contract lots of issues,’ explained Pellegrini. ‘I just don’t want to be in the same position we were in where we were almost defenseless. If they don’t fulfill the contract, it’s going to take a year to get out of it. Is there a way to protect ourselves and make sure that we are happy with the provider and we don’t get trampled?’

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti suggested that the Township doesn’t have to partner with the N6 for waste collection.

‘My concern is these guys that come in and low ball it (the contract) and flip the contract to someone who can live up to that price, which is poor service,’ said Mortelliti.

Township CAO Susan Plamondon said the cost savings makes it advantageous to partner with the N6 and this time around, the Township can be clear on the expectations of service delivery.

?The savings were so significant if we all went in it together,? noted Plamondon. ?I would be very surprised if it still doesn't pay for us to do it. We learned from it. Our expectations need to be realistic and at the same time we need to be clear about what they are.? Staff will report back to Council with respect to opportunities for adjustments in the service levels provided, range of services provided, opportunities for further waste diversion, and cost efficiencies including potential harmonization of waste bylaws and associated cost savings.