

Clarington This Week

Councillor questions second trip to Europe

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DURHAM -- A second trip to Europe has a Regional councillor calling the works committee out.

When a Durham Region delegation headed to Europe last May to investigate waste management technologies, Oshawa Regional Councillor Brian Nicholson questioned the one-week trip, how it came to be approved, where it was represented in the budget and how elected officials who attended were chosen.

Last year, the Region's commissioner of finance, Jim Clapp, said no rules were broken.

It cost about \$6,000 a head for the delegation of eight.

But, when the subject of a second trip to Europe came up at the April 25 works committee meeting, Coun. Nicholson again questioned the trip and how it came to be approved.

"If this was such a defensible process why wasn't there a report on it?" He asked. "Why wasn't it a line item in the budget? You are making us all look bad in government."

The Region's works commissioner, Cliff Curtis, explained a second trip is being planned. The details are yet to be worked out, but they are thinking about visiting Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and Italy at the beginning of July. He said it may be slightly more expensive because of the time of the year and because they will be doing more travelling, but it will be in the same order of magnitude.

"We have some new members on works committee and we've also got some politicians and senior staff from the host community that we wanted to get over to Europe to take a look at the technology and make sure it is something they could be comfortable with," Mr. Curtis said.

The Region is also considering inviting some representatives from the ministries of the environment and energy.

However, the way the trip came out, Coun. Nicholson said, is a concern because he didn't see it listed in the budget.

"I don't believe this committee has the authority to do this," he said. "We have to ask council's permission to expend funds. All I am suggesting to you is that we are not immune to the process."

He said the works committee isn't an autonomous body and he felt the process of taking trips to investigate waste technology was being done behind closed doors. Furthermore, Coun. Nicholson said the trip is skewed towards one technology.

"Minds are already made up," Coun. Nicholson said. "If we are truly an investigative body then we should consider other options."

Coun. Nicholson was alone in his line of questioning, which turned into a heated debate about the merits of this type of educational trip.

"I take exception to someone saying we've slighted the public," Pickering Councillor Rick Johnson said. "The public retains us to make these types of decisions for them."

He went on to say he doesn't want something built in his community or his neighbour's community that he hasn't seen and tested.

Regional Chairman Roger Anderson agreed it is necessary for councillors to see and smell the technology for themselves.

"Before anyone makes a decision on this they are going to be well informed," Mr. Anderson said adding the trip will undergo the same process as any other and staff would come back with a report on it.

Works committee chairman Charlie Trim said the planning of the trip is still in its early stages and it was in no way being done behind closed doors.

"The process will be clear and it will follow through the system," Coun. Trim said. "When all of the detail is worked out they will come back to this committee."

Coun. Nicholson insisted there needs to be a report on the reasons for the trip as well as on its merit, cost and who participates.

"If it is defensible then there is nothing to be lost by taking it to council," Coun. Nicholson said.

Mr. Curtis said the funding for the trip was approved in a line item in the budget.

"This study and these consultants were all approved by council in the budget," he said.