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AMALGAMATION: Politicians seek details on Newmarket site

Councillors at odds over fire dispatch

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Although Newmarket's new fire hall was built two years ago to hold a regional dispatch facility, some councillors are questioning why the centre is being set up there.

York councillors agreed Thursday to "initially" run operations out of the McCaffrey Road hall, where 1,600 square feet of space has been set aside for the centre.

At the same time, councillors left the door open to investigate a different permanent location. In fact, the region will likely have two centres — a main facility and a back-up centre in case of emergencies.

The region acknowledged 30 years ago that a regionalized dispatch system was needed, but political squabbles have prevented the more efficient system from being implemented.

Still, Markham Councillor Frank Scarpitti complained councillors were caught off guard by the Newmarket rec-

ommendation because there wasn't a written report explaining the rationale for the northern site.

"I've been supportive of this. I want to see the process move," said Scarpitti, a member of the fire services task force.

"(But) I want to caution the committee we shouldn't be pulling motions out of the air. I may not have a problem (ultimately with the site), but I want to see a report on it."

Markham Councillor Ralph Aselin pointed out the Newmarket location is in the same neighbourhood as the York Regional Police dispatch centre.

If there is a power outage, Aselin is worried both communications facilities will be knocked out.

Suggesting it may make more sense to put the fire dispatch centre in a new Markham fire hall, Aselin is also worried the Newmarket building won't be able to accommodate future expansion.

But Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor said the facility can double in size if necessary.

He pointed out the \$1-million fire hall was built on regional land. In exchange for a 50-year lease, the town agreed to set aside space for the dispatch centre.

It cost between \$60,000 and \$70,000 to build the extra space for the centre. The communications system will cost as much as \$4.8 million, depending on which system is implemented.

Chief administrative officer Alan Wells said every fire chief in the region has approved the initial Newmarket centre.

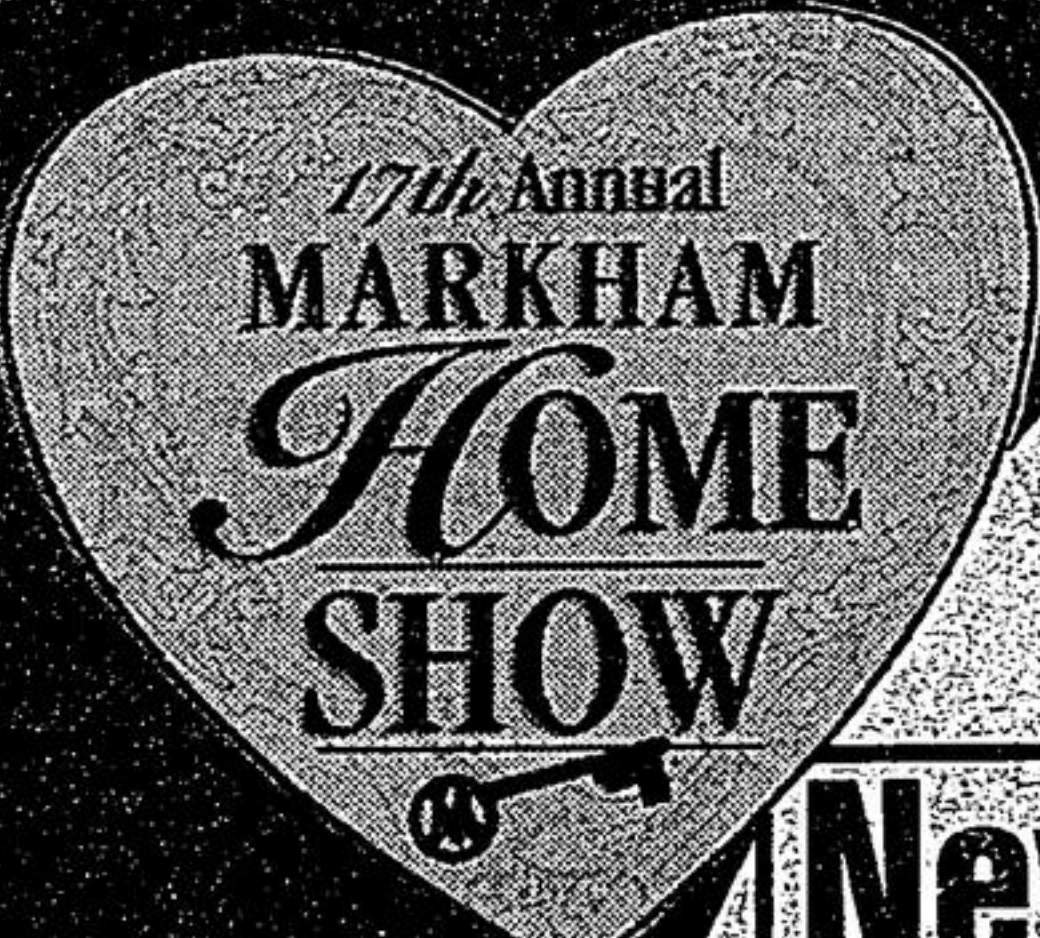
Markham Councillor Gord Landon urged councillors to get on with approving the facility.

"I don't know why we're messing around with this decision. To delay at this point is silly," he said.

"This is what we're becoming famous for — delay, delay, delay."

According to a 1997 review of the region's fire services, taxpayers would save \$96 million over 25 years if the five fire departments were amalgamated.

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