

\$4 million revamp will open Armoury to Town Park ? and pave way for Culinary Institute

By Brock Weir

A \$4 million dollar revamp of the Aurora Armoury will not only pave the way for the Canadian Institute of Food & Wine to expand to Aurora, but also open up the historic building to the equally historic surroundings of Town Park.

Concept plans for the extensive overhaul of the 1874 building situated on the northeast corner of Town Park at Mosley and Larmont Streets were presented to Council last week.

They include a 1,600 square foot expansion to the south end of the building while opening up portions of the east and west facades to the surrounding community.

The concept plans were greeted warmly by the majority of Council, but was used as a springboard by local lawmakers to get in their points on the future use of the building before the Town's lease deal with Niagara College was announced on Friday afternoon.

?The program elements we were given largely focused around a central events space and that takes about a third of the plan into the centre,? said architect Jim Burkett. ?Flanking it is a multipurpose meeting/classroom. There is a snack bar component to serve the park and an event kitchen will ultimately serve as a flexible demonstration and interpretation space and that is served by a series of support spaces such as freezers, fridges, and interior garbage. The key point of that being that it not effect the neighbourhood on Larmont or Mosley Streets.

?The key part of the plan is really just opening up the plan and that central event space to the park.?

A key driver in the concept plan, said co-architect Philip Hastings, was retaining the original form of the building. That includes removing the current aluminum siding on the building and replacing it with vertically placed wood boards which is more in keeping with the historical character of the building and removing the drop ceiling to expose what they believe are original beams up above.

?It will bring it back as much as possible to its original function while, at the same time, giving it a new use in the park,? he said.

Added Mr. Burkett: ?It all boiled down to four design considerations, the first one being really understanding the shape and the cultural importance of what the Armoury has been for such a long time. The second, and perhaps the most important, was opening up this building to the park so that basically the building is not a backdrop anymore, but it is integrated into all of the activities.?

Rounding out the four are technical upgrades to bring the building up to snuff as well as looking at the building as ?flexible? space for Town use.

Although Council spoke favourably about the plan overall ? with the exception of Councillor Gartner who said she had concerns about what opening up the building on the east and west sides would do to the privacy of surrounding neighbours ? heated words were exchanged over the process leading up to the concept plan.

This discussion was led by Councillor John Abel, a long-time opponent to the plan.

His first concern centred on the timing of the proposal considering it had been discussed behind closed doors for nearly 18 months. Timing was of the essence, responded Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny, so the partnership with what turned out to be Niagara College could move along ?sooner rather than later.?. Adding urgency to the timeline is taking advantage of grant money to bring the project to fruition.

Overall, however, Councillor Abel said the whole process lacked community input.

?In recent years, we have seen ways that evidence-based planning can be used and abused,? he said. ?We are using our Strategic Plan and we're moving forward in a non-transparent way and we're not serving our community and that community trusts us to make the best decisions. We have not seen anything of what the post-secondary [institution] is bringing. We haven't seen any of the financials, we haven't see any terms?and it just diminishes the community trust when we operate this way.?

Councillor Michael Thompson, however, said Councillor Abel was not ?completely accurate? in that Councillors have indeed seen the terms, financials and other information associated with the College deal.

?We have seen them, we have had conversations around them in Closed Session, some of which I am sure will become public once everything is signed and completed, but we are fairly aware of what is going on in there, what the business plan is, what some of the future implications are. We aren't going in with this with our eyes closed. We have a good sense of what may happen and we understand the risks and benefits as well.?

And, for many other elected officials, it will all be worth it in the end.

?We have had communications with the public around the Promenade and Library Square and Town Park and something like this encompassed what many stakeholders wanted and indeed we are proxies for residents of Aurora,? said Councillor Harold Kim. ?In

situations like this you have only a short opportunity to make those decisions. There are ? and were ? many municipalities interested in hosting this post-secondary institution and we thought it was too good an opportunity to pass up.?

Councillor Thompson expressed a similar view.

?From a strategic objective, this has long been an initiative of this Council and this term and last term,? he said. ?We pursued post-secondary institution on multiple occasions and made many overtures because we saw it as part of our strategic plan and we saw it as a vital component to help the Downtown Revitalization Plan and so forth. We had lots of conversation around the Council chambers about the potential to secure one and at the same time since we purchased the armoury we have had conversations about wanting to improve the facility, to maximize the use of it.

?For me, when I look at this project, although there is still more information to come, I think this is a tremendous benefit to the community and I think it can only continue to grow and benefit the community as a whole.?