

Cultural Groups united with Church Street expansion, Council divided

By Brock Weir

The two organizations currently calling the Church Street School home are excited about the possibilities a multimillion dollar expansion of the building will bring to both the Aurora Cultural Centre and the Aurora Museum & Archives.

But, while the two groups are using this opportunity to build partnerships and form 'synergies,' those same synergies were not to be found around the Council table.

Speaking to *The Auroran* on Friday, Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, and Shawna White, Curator of the Aurora Museum & Archives, said they wanted to stress the decision to expand the historic landmark was not an expansion for either the Centre or the Museum, but for both 'and indeed the community at large.

'There is a lot of opportunity right now and if we can all keep an open mind and have a transparent process allowing each other to collaborate, I think we will win with the design,' said Ms. Haines. 'I always look at it as how we strengthen the organizations that exist to deliver more to the community ' and this space enables that. We have a lot of connections right now I think can really grow. We are limited in physical resources here. We have one room that we're able to use for our educational programs and we can't expand that. This is a huge opportunity and the Museum and us are already talking about the activities they want to activate over the next period of time and how we can create synergies around that.'

Added Ms. White: 'Aside from the obvious need of infrastructure and storage behind the scenes, the new building provides an opportunity as another venue to tell the stories in Aurora. We want a place that is activated by many different members.'

'It's all about partnership,' concluded Ms. Haines with a nod.

But last Tuesday's Council meeting was rife with division and indeed competing visions over what should ultimately form the centre of Library Square.

Renewing his call for a building separate from what exists closer to Victoria Hall, Councillor John Abel said this option should be on the table, along with a peer review.

The plan, as proposed, he said, would be better for the community as a whole.

He questioned why the new building 'had' to be attached to what he described as 'the Cultural Centre' which already receives a healthy annual grant from the Town. He also argued that the Town is now in the same position it once was in 2013 to move forward with Library Square, a plan which was ultimately put on ice while the Town unsuccessfully pursued an opportunity to partner with Seneca College on turning the now-demolished old library building into an innovation incubator.

'We deferred for five months,' he said. 'Then, in January of 2014, they came back and said they weren't going to do it and we decided we weren't going to do anything. Now we find ourselves in January 2018 where we have to get this going. Yeah, we're in a rush. You're darn right we're in a rush because we could have done this before. There is no time to pause and reflect at this stage.

'We could have done a great job if we had used all that time to do this properly. Now I think we'll be running into a money pit by putting this here with an atrium. The Library is going to be handicapped and I use that word because they are not going to be able to access that building as it is designed now. We're going to be taking that all away.'

These comments led to a few fiery exchanges, the first coming from Councillor Paul Pirri, who said these were all concerns Councillor Abel had raised before.

'With all due respect to Councillor Abel, he is the only person around this table who has advocated for ' and continues to advocate for ' a separate building,' said Councillor Pirri. 'I think the decision has already been made that we're going to put something beside the building and despite the fact Councillor Abel would like to see a new design with the building separated, it is important to remember we made a decision as a Council. It is not about what I specifically would like to see'but what motions have been made around the table, what instructions we have given to staff, and what we have given loud and clear is we're going to move forward with an addition on this building.'

Next up was Councillor Tom Mrakas.

'He (Councillor Abel) has told us all why he has these concerns: because it is not his idea,' Councillor Mrakas claimed. 'He has stated that to all of us.'

This was met by a point of privilege called by Councillor Abel, prompting Mayor Dawe to caution Councillor Mrakas of his word choice.