

Café concept for Library Square percolates debate on vision

By Brock Weir

Building a café to serve the patrons of Library Square brewed up some heated debate around the Council table last week.

At issue is Council's approval of \$157,700 to complete a space within the overall Library Square vision for what's dubbed a 'café snack bar/concession style' area. Tentatively approved at the Committee level last Tuesday and set to be ratified this week, staff recommended a café/concession space with this price tag over a \$415,000 café with a full kitchen.

Staff recommended against the café with full kitchen because internal amenities like washrooms and staff spaces inside the Church Street School addition would need to move to accommodate it.

The café/concession space, although smaller, would be large enough to provide for a commercial operation, according to the report penned by Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services.

'The proposed design would not require any functional spaces to be moved, keeping the current footprint,' she said. 'A service counter could be added to provide a typical concession area, similar to a coffee shop or to-go kiosk. Space on the plaza level permits approximately 20-30 seats which would be suitable for a snack bar/concession type of operation.'

Ms. McDougall added that to get feedback on the 'functionality' of the space, the Town consulted with Niagara College, which will soon take over the historic Aurora Armoury with a new campus for their Canadian Food & Wine Institute, who weighed in on the amenities that would be needed in the area.

'When comparing the two options, the snack bar/concession style option provides a future commercial opportunity, can be used for special events, does not impact functional spaces and would be a smaller investment. Without a business case, the snack bar/concession option would meet the needs of a future opportunity with limited risk. It is for these reasons the snack bar/concession is the preferred option.'

It was not, however, the preferred option of Councillor John Gallo who said a snack bar or concession stand was not in keeping with the grander vision for Library Square.

The report, he said, spoke to a lack of business case to support full food operation, like a more conventional restaurant, but he disagreed, asking if other businesses had been gauged for their interest.

They have not, said Ms. McDougall.

?We haven't done any of that, and to suggest there isn't a business case?I have read the previous reports and I haven't seen anything concrete other than at our last meeting, the consultants pinged off a few places that don't work well [such as] the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga,? said Councillor Gallo. ?I have been there and it is a fantastic restaurant, and I beg to differ that it doesn't work. For me, there are two reasons why I am still doing my best to push as hard as I can for significant food services, and that is it adds to the dynamic of the plaza, or whatever you want to call it, it provides a service, as well as it provides a revenue stream and, to me, that is really important. We haven't fully, in my view, fleshed that out yet.? That being said, Councillor Gallo said he did not support carving out full amenities to the tune of \$415,000, but rather have a restaurant come in and do their own leaseholds. Rental rates over a long-term lease would recover costs, he said.

?If we haven't contacted a Starbucks or a Tim Hortons, if we're moving into more of a café-style, that is probably a pretty good thing to do to understand what it is they need if we're spending money towards outfitting the space. At the end of the day, I would be very, very disappointed if we ended up with a café similar to our arenas. I would be extremely frustrated and disappointed if that is what we end up with. It just isn't at the level that this needs to be.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she thought ?in horror? of having a snack bar at Library Square similar to those in the local arenas, and expressed interest in ?exploring the possibility? of a restaurant as ?a money-maker.?

Other members of Council, including Councillors Rachel Gilliland and Harold Kim, said they believed the snack bar concept was the right option given the footprint available.

?There was a time that I wanted to explore what it was to have a restaurant per se just to see what those options are,? said Councillor Gilliland. ?I think what [staff] have presented is a fair assessment of the consequence of doing that, which I think you are losing programming space and you are losing space for people to actually sit, 20 ? 30 people. I think the café option does kind of suit the space.?

Added Councillor

Kim: ?Given that we're limited in our footprint of the building itself, without encroaching on the Library Square, I don't know how we can put enough square footage in a potential restaurant to make it worth it. A couple of the businesses or some of the contractors have said, we don't have traffic during the weekdays to warrant anyone even bidding for a contract or some kind of arrangement. When you put all of those things together, I am not sure if it is worth the extra two or three months to put this project on hold to blue sky some more. In the end, if we don't have the space, it is hard to blue sky unless we build higher.?

Councillor Gallo was nevertheless firm in his belief, stating he was ?trying to push the envelope as far as? he possibly could.

?I am of the opinion that we need to turn over every rock and explore every avenue to generate some income because this is a big project and not only the capital costs but the operating costs,? he concluded. ?I want to do everything I possibly can to see where we can generate revenue to ease the burden on the taxpayers and have a wonderful facility. That is my end goal. To me, we have not explored the option of a restaurant to the degree that we can make a solid decision that it doesn't work. At the end of the day, had we gone through that process, I might be with all of you and say, ?It just doesn't work because of all of this,' but we didn't do that and I don't feel confident it doesn't work because we didn't do that.?