

## A "baby step" forward for Library Square

**By Brock Weir**

The long-awaited redevelopment of Library Square is set to take a 'baby step' forward this week with Council set to approve beginning a design process of what will replace the old public library and seniors' centre buildings on Victoria Street. Sitting at General Committee last Tuesday, Council members voted to throw out two concept plans prepared for the area by FOTENN which outlined extensions to the Aurora Cultural Centre and Victoria Hall, along with various parking lot and water feature configurations, and going forward with a new RFP for design services.

At the same time, they also approved a \$500,000 budget, funded from Council's Discretionary Reserves, to demolish the two buildings and finance the detailed design process.

The move came after stakeholders from the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre, and the surrounding community came to the podium to express concerns over the plan, particularly the thorny parking issue which is always in short supply at the current Library building.

Many of these concerns were shared by Council who decided to reaffirm their overall vision for the area, but starting fresh with new designers to realise that vision.

'We all support the idea of the development of the area, and I think we all support the idea of moving ahead but, understandably, there are concerns and everyone wants to be cautious in the approach,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'I think this is a baby step forward.'

Going into last week's meeting, staff recommended Council endorse the first of two concepts presented by FOTENN, which included 76 parking spaces north of the Aurora Cultural Centre, along with a water feature.

This suggestion, however, was almost dead in the water as Library reps raised concerns over moving existing parking away from the Library itself, along with the challenges of providing adequate accessible parking. Although lawmakers said they liked certain components of each plan, a hybrid model was not necessarily on the table.

Plans, as presented, ignored provisions for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and needed a serious re-think, contended Councillor Wendy Gaertner. The plan, she said, was taking away parking right next to the library, replacing it with a larger parking lot on the footprint of Library Square, yet the plan suggests this parking lot space at some point be converted to a new building down the road.

'I want someone to come to us and say, 'Okay, I know you want a gathering space, I know you want a civic square, you may want a water feature or a place where people can sit and relax, you want to make better use of your Cultural Centre and really encourage the Library to be a hub,' she said. 'I want someone to come to me with a design. I don't want to endorse an idea that, to me, we're really no farther along if you're looking at it in the practical sense. We've got a concept plan that doesn't work so now we have to work on the concept and keep bringing it back.'

'I would like to see a hybrid between the two options,' said Mayor Geoff Dawe. 'I think generically there are some great elements I like here. I like the extension of the Church Street School and I think it has some fabulous potential to highlight things we don't have an opportunity to highlight at this point. As long as we understand we all have some individual items we would like to see or not see we're moving forward in a generic sense.'

Councillor John Abel was among the Councillors who said they were happy Council was 'moving forward' on Library Square, but he was still waiting to see the 'buy-in' from the surrounding community that what was on the table was a great idea.

He said he was keen to move forward 'this time without FOTENN' and put out another RFP to get fresh ideas, with a particular emphasis on solving the parking problem.

'Let's go for an RFP right away, get a fresh idea and go out to design,' he said. 'We can have something within a quarter and work with our stakeholders to get some ideas and go forward from there. I think this missed its mark. FOTENN has been with us now for two years. We have got our money's worth and I am not complaining about that.'

Looking at the two options before Council last week, Councillor Tom Mrakas said, at first blush, he was in favour of the second option, which included a roundabout drop-off space for Library users, but, as the days wore on, he saw the practical aspects of Option 1.

'I do agree that there are some components from both that make sense [and] I think we need to continue looking at this from a high level,' he said. 'We have a vision. We have stated it many times here at this table. We have heard it from the public, we have heard it from the residents, we have heard it from community partners and what they want over a 20 year span and we decided what this

vision is going to be before. We said we needed more community space and we said we needed a civic square.?

The next step, he said, was moving forward with the demolition and then discussing the uses at the detailed design process.

?Then we can finally make a decision on Library Square,? he concluded. ?I am looking forward to moving forward and continuing the revitalization of downtown.?

Added Councillor Sandra Humfryes: ?I am so happy we're at this point and once we get past here we can move onto that next step for the design phase and I am looking forward to that. This is not perfect at all and we have a lot of work to do, but it is a step in the right direction.?