

Aurora takes leap forward in making new museum a reality

By Brock Weir

Groups could be getting ready to put their best foot forward to prove they're the right people for the job in re-establishing Aurora's museum.

Councillors are set to approve a process this week which would get the ball rolling on securing museum services for the Aurora Collection. The Town formally took ownership of the Aurora Collection, thousands of artefacts collected and curated over the last 50 years by the Aurora Historical Society in August.

In a report before Councillors at the Committee level last week, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, developed a process for prequalified bidders which would evaluate submissions on the team's qualifications, experience, familiarity with the collection and the overall quality of the plan. On the shortlist of pre-qualified proponents were the Cultural Asset Management Group, which was recently tasked with doing a complete review, evaluation and appraisal of the collection, the Aurora Historical Society and the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The proposed RFP, as it stood last week, would give 35 per cent of the score for the exhibition of artefacts, including a minimum of three displays a year in the Aurora Room at the Cultural Centre, 25 per cent for costs, five per cent for value added items, and 35 per cent for the care of the collection.

'The Aurora Collection has suffered over the past number of years through lack of resources for the appropriate care, maintenance, and storage of practices,' said Mr. Downey in his report. 'As such, a requirement of the RFP will have to have a qualified curator identified as part of the team at the time of submission.'

Councillors, however, struck off the curator as an immediate requirement for the contract, as well as the requirement for three unique displays, suggesting it should be up to the proponents to show their creativity.

'I would hate for somebody to be precluded from the evaluation of their proposal because at the time of their submission they don't have a qualified curator here,' said Councillor Michael Thompson.

A similar view was put forward by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe.

'They could be fully willing to [have a curator], but why would they go out and hire a person on speculation?' he asked. 'I think it would be very easy to change the wording that they must have a qualified curator within 30 days. We're not working on supersonic speed on this particular project.'

For Councillor Chris Ballard, requiring proponents to name names when it comes to a curator could put possible qualified proponents out of the running through no fault of their own, he said. While he said he agreed the collection had 'suffered' in past years because of a 'lack of resources' for the proper care and maintenance of the artefacts, he said he believed there was a better way forward.

'I think that we would exclude too many possible proponents from being able to submit and I think, as has been stated, that we have to be a little more flexible,' he said. 'We have to look at information on how the collection will be taken care of, rather than just putting the name up of a curator and their academic credentials. I don't think any local organization is going to go out and hire a curator for a proposal when they don't know if they are going to get it or not.'

Of the three pre-qualified groups, only the Aurora Historical Society and the Cultural Asset Management Group have a curator under contract. As for why the Cultural Centre was included within the group, Mr. Downey said he feels they have the 'capability' of bringing someone on board, or identifying someone at the very least when they come forward.

‘There is a need to make sure they have identified a curator in their proposal,’ said Mr. Downey. ‘We’re not asking them to identify who they plan on engaging because part of that proposal is a fee and I don’t know how you identify how much you are willing to pay this individual if you don’t know who this individual is.’

Some Councillors, however, were in favour of keeping the recommendations as they were.

‘I want to make sure we have a museum that will be cared for and the experience of a curator is absolutely critical to the maintenance of these artefacts,’ said Councillor Sandra Humfryes, a long-time advocate for a new museum. ‘If you don’t have that curator involvement at the time of submission, I am not sure how these things could be answered without that qualification.’

Councillor Evelyn Buck, on the other hand, has long been a proponent of having a curator as a Town employee. She said she maintains that position.

‘I am glad to see this move, but I would like to see where that money is coming from,’ said Councillor Buck. ‘I think they are spending more than enough [in this field] now. The Cultural Centre has a \$370,000 grant and the Historical Society last year had \$60,000. We can’t add to that. That’s where the resource has to come from. We can’t keep adding to the tax burden for the same purpose.’