

Capital Campaign for Aurora Town Square hits snag after Councillors question naming rights



A capital campaign to help offset the cost of the Aurora Town Square project hit a potential snag last week after some Council members voiced concerns at the March 1 General Committee meeting about selling off the naming rights for various parts of the redevelopment.

Capital fundraising efforts have included approaches to 'high net worth' individuals and companies who might want to contribute to the project, including the potential sale of naming rights to the outdoor space at the heart of Town Square, the bridge connecting the Aurora Public Library to the new addition to the historic Church Street School, to the heritage building itself.

According to a report before Council from Phil Rose, Project Manager for Town Square, Council received an update in Closed Session last July with a 'shortlist of donor prospects' that could be approached to contribute.

'It was noted that the fundraising goal was designed so that the funds raised could support a variety of opportunities, including but not limited to, asset replacement, program subsidy, facility enhancement, public art, operating budget offset and capital costs,' said Mr. Rose. 'During negotiations with donors, it would be determined how they prefer their funds to be assigned/collected.'

A full review of all components related to Town Square identified 33 possible naming opportunities 'representing over \$5 million in possible naming gifts.' 155 potential donors were also identified in the process, with 103 still left to be approached.

But despite the work being done to date, alarm bells were raised by a number of Council members who said they wanted a bit more input into the process, including Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said selling the naming rights to the local landmark schoolhouse was not what she had in mind for the project.

'The Church Street School is the Church Street School, and one of our foremost heritage sites,' said Councillor Gaertner. 'I don't think we should be selling the naming rights for that.'

While Robin McDougall, Aurora's Community Services Manager, said that the nature of the site can be preserved with the naming rights zeroed in on just the addition to the building, Councillor Gaertner said she was under the impression what was up for sale, as far as naming rights were concerned, were amenities within the new build.

'I think it is just improper what we're trying to do here,' said Councillor Gaertner, adding she was also uncomfortable with selling the naming rights for the outdoor component of the square. 'With respect to the bridge, that's right up front and Centre in our Aurora

Town Square, so that would depend on the size of the lettering and where it was going to be placed on the building. I know we would like to have the money, but on the other hand, I don't want to sell any naming rights that are going to diminish the identity of Aurora Town Square. I just don't agree with this at all.?

Also voicing concern was Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said she would welcome another closed-door discussion on Capital Campaign negotiations.

Responding to her questions on how these negotiations were being handled, Ms. McDougall told the Councillor that the negotiations are being led by consultants hired to drive the campaign, Mr. Rose in his capacity as Project Manager, and also by Mayor Tom Mrakas.

The discussions, she said, included what potential owners might be interested in, the threshold of their contributions, and what they would like to see in return, such as their name put on an amenity or just a donation.

?Council should have some sort of input in deciding what would be the best course of action moving forward in what that monetary revenue would look like in the best interests of the Town and taxpayers,? said Councillor Gilliland. ?We're leaving the door open as to whether we want it to be a philanthropic or reoccurring revenue. We really haven't stipulated what those rules of engagement are. I just feel like we never really had that conversation. Maybe I assumed we would have that conversation after we agreed we wanted to do naming rights. I am supportive of that, but it is understanding what business model we want to go through and support. If someone wants to come in and do a one-time contribution that we can't say no, I am not saying I am against that, but I am trying [to understand] what we're trying to achieve as far as a business model.?

Council approved a motion from Councillor Michael Thompson calling on staff to report back with their findings and to make their findings subject to Council approval.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter