

Council rejects Abel's call for Armoury business case

By Brock Weir

A case stating the economic benefits of converting the historic Aurora Armoury into a campus of Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute has one again been rejected by Council.

Council members voted 6 ? 2 to reject renewed calls from Councillor John Abel for an economic impact analysis of Aurora's deal with Niagara College which, he said, should show the public the economic offshoots such a deal will bring to the Town.

?I think it is important coming out of 18 months of closed session [that] the public should be aware of the social and economic benefits,? Councillor Abel told the rest of Council, taking aim at Aurora going it alone with out additional partners, including funding from the Province. ?I think it is important that if we're going to say post-secondary has economic and social benefits, that we understand what they are.?

?We're not in a position to sink millions and millions into post-secondary unless we have the Province,? he continued. ?The Province requires an investment strategy and it has to do an economic analysis before you can apply for them to consider. If you don't have that, it is not a business model they are even interested in looking at. If we're going to?take this route and make this investment, we should understand what those impact benefits are that we talk about. Primarily, the spin-off economic [benefits] are the activities associated with the students.

?We have to understand that if there are benefits, the long-runs are with income tax from people who graduate and graduates from culinary wouldn't be able to afford to stay in Aurora. We won't see those economic impacts and that is why it is important we bring this forward so our citizens understand what kind of investment we're making.?

Most Council members, however, said the information is already out there ? including Councillor Harold Kim who said while an Economic Impact Analysis is ?useful in many cases? he was unsure he wanted to ?put in staff time?because these types of impact analysis reports are already out there. ?Citing examples of how a post-secondary presence has acted as a ?boost? for other communities, he said he felt the same would come from the Canadian Food & Wine Institute (CFWI).

?I don't see how a culinary institute would be that much different,? he said. ?I am fine with the Institute locating here with the positive impacts I see.?

Councillor Michael Thompson shared the viewpoint that the information has been brought home time and again. Councillor Thompson said he and Councillor Abel were both on Aurora's post-secondary working group which first focused on bringing a ?Fab Lab? to the old Library building, now demolished, on Victoria Street, and then re-focused again on trying to attract York University's new campus to both Aurora and Newmarket.

?Over that time, staff have always come to us and talked about the economic benefits and the community benefits of attracting a post-secondary institution,? said Councillor Thompson, asking CAO Doug Nadorozny whether municipal staff did their ?due diligence? on examining the economic impacts of the CFWI deal.

?We assumed the non-spreadsheet benefits of having the institution in this community were of [interest] to Council and the community,? responded the CAO. ?It was on that basis that we started off with an economic level. That work was done on a more general level on post-secondary education and its value to the communities. From that point on, our negotiations with Niagara College, as this Council is aware, was based on the actual American model that we saw appropriate level of investment for the return that we get over the full term of the lease that spoke more to the dollar costs and not subject the Town to excessive amounts of subsidy to get that post-secondary institution here in the community.?

Mayor Geoff Dawe, on the other hand, the only Council member to vote in favour of Councillor Abel's motion, said the responsibility for due diligence falls on Council.

?Does our Council feel that due diligence occurred? I would say yes,? said Mayor Dawe, supporting Councillor Thompson's view that if any analysis were to occur, it should be carried out by a third party, rather than have municipal staff turn it around in 28 days as originally suggested in the motion. ?I think we have looked at it very carefully over the last six or seven years.?

Councillor Jeff Thom was also of the view that ?every single Councillor? did their due diligence on the Armoury ? and that includes looking at the economic benefits. He agreed, however, with suggestions made earlier in the evening that a report carried out by a third party would provide a good ?baseline? to measure these impacts.

?We made our individual decisions based on what we thought was the best interests of the Town, the community and included in that was the economic impact,? said Councillor Thom. ?As has been stated, if we want to track this project over the term of the lease in order to look at how we can improve on the lease moving forward?as this progresses, I think that is something worth looking into

and certainly will take longer than two meeting cycles to complete.

?Councillor Abel has just outlined why ? and he voted against the project ? reiterated why he voted against it and, in my opinion, this is not an attempt to get the Economic Impacts, but to further drag out the process so that? he has another opportunity to talk about why he is against the project. We have moved forward with this and I certainly believe it is in the economic interests of the Town and will have benefits for our Town. Certainly I am in totally in favour of tracking that progress, but I don't think that is the intent of this motion. I think the intent of this motion is for Councillor Abel to, quite frankly, continue to grandstand on this issue.? This accusation of ?grandstanding? promoted a Question of Personal Privilege from Councillor Abel objecting to the term, a complaint upheld by Mayor Dawe. Nevertheless, Councillor Abel persisted with his argument.

?We talk about what these benefits are, but nobody can specifically say what they are. We should have had this,? he said. ?What we're doing is we're adding 1,400 square feet to the Armoury and we haven't even seen what we're going to net. It looks like we're going to net 3,000 square feet. In my mind, we're not gaining anything socially, we're losing on a great, valuable space. I think what would be fair to the public is knowing exactly what we have done. The only way to do it is with a third party.

?These are very common and they are used to convince policy makers and they are used to convince the public on why you would make such an investment. I think it would only be fair since we didn't have a steering committee and we didn't have an investment strategy and we didn't partner with the province, which is a mandatory, and we don't know what their program development is, we should at least let the public know what we have done and this is a very easy tool to use.?