

Cultural Centre, Museum questioned as budget draws to close

By Brock Weir

Aurorans are still set to receive a 1.8 per cent tax increase on the municipal portion of their tax bill for the year ahead as discussions on the Town's Operating Budget near completion.

The final numbers are set to be crunched and approved at December 8's Council meeting, but a final budget deliberation session on the schedule brought tentative funding boosts to the Aurora Cultural Centre and Aurora Historical Society (AHS) to account for Aurora's growth over the last few years.

Last year, the Board of the Aurora Cultural Centre, which is contracted to provide 'cultural services' to the Town of Aurora, came to Council with a budget ask of \$377,000. This year, however, was a different story. Citing loss of revenue and less-than-expected growth from their loss of the Aurora Room, which was taken over last year by the Aurora Museum and Archives, they requested a budget increase to \$433,786 to meet their shortfalls.

'The Board feels it is Council's right to know what it takes to run the Centre and maintain current service levels,' said Bonnie Kraft, Chair of the Cultural Centre's Board of Directors. 'We felt it would be doing the Centre and the Town a disservice if we didn't present that number. We could use the \$377,000 grant number and build a budget around that, but for us that would have meant presenting a deficit budget, going into our reserves for a second year, as well as having to make hard decisions about the reduction of programs.'

It was a proposal over which some Councillors balked, considering numerous municipal departments were tasked with holding the budget line to meet Council's targeted 1.8 per cent tax increase. Others, however, were supportive, sparking a debate on the future of the Aurora Museum and Archives and the needs of the Cultural Centre itself.

'We often say you have to do more with less and we took away one of your abilities to create revenue by putting the museum there,' said Councillor John Abel at last week's Budget meeting. 'We didn't realise the impact. The good news is we're going to try and figure out our Cultural Precinct and we will find room for the museum because we can't put them in the same place. Perhaps that availability [of the Aurora Room] will come up once again and we'll get things sorted.'

Councillor Sandra Humfries, one of the driving forces behind the restoration of the Aurora Museum at the Church Street School facility, agreed, saying she too hadn't anticipated the impact such a move might have had on the Aurora Cultural Centre. Others, such as Councillor Tom Mrakas, said he was in favour of the Cultural Centre 'holding the line' for the year ahead and revisiting the topic next year, while Councillor Harold Kim said a long-term funding model was needed.

In the intervening week, however, local heritage advocates bristled at the idea of the Aurora Museum and Archives being anywhere else but in the Church Street School. They came back to Town Hall on Monday night to make their case on why it should not only stay put but expand further into the facility.

Historian David Heard led the charge and said he was 'shocked' at the comments made the previous week, considering over \$3 million was raised over the previous decade to transform the Church Street School into the 'Aurora Heritage Centre' rather than the 'Cultural Centre' it became.

'There were so many efforts made for that to become a dream come true and I am not buying any stories that someone dropped the keys on the table and walked away,' said Mr. Heard. 'The museum shouldn't be worried about losing a room. It should be expanding into the building.'

His remarks were followed by an impassioned speech by former deputy mayor Bob McRoberts, a long-time member of the Aurora Historical Society (AHS). In 2013, the AHS sold the Aurora Collection, their archive of tens of thousands of local artefacts, to the

Town of Aurora for \$1 in the hopes its contents would be maintained and displayed with care.

?When several of you implied a different room might be found for a museum, my heart fluttered,? said Mr. McRoberts.

?Assumptions were made, magic happened and the Cultural Centre opened with the collection all in the basement. The whole building was intended to be a museum. AHS staff assisted the Town in applying for the grant [for] a heritage centre. The Town accepted a grant to be spent on a heritage centre. The AHS paid over \$548,000 from its own coffers to turn it into a heritage centre. With this history and commitment in the 129 year old building, how could any of you possibly contemplate moving the museum elsewhere? The space should be in the Heritage Centre. The Town re-opened the re-energized Museum and Archives, but it seems to be having a very challenging first year.?

In the end, the Aurora Cultural Centre will have to settle for a boost to \$393,900. While Councillor Sandra Humfryes maintained her position on their full ask, along with Councillors Wendy Gaertner and Jeff Thom opposing the motion, those in support said it was a compromise to account for the cost of inflation and to account for Aurora's growth since their last budget increase.

?We have taken space from the Centre, but if you look around the table and what our directors have had to do, they are not making easy decisions either,? said Councillor Paul Pirri. ?I expect the Cultural Centre will be doing the same thing and I wish them as much success as they had in the past, and I wish them more success.?

Once the budget is settled, it is hoped by Mayor Geoff Dawe along with Councillors Harold Kim and Michael Thompson that organizations like the AHS and Cultural Centre are brought to the Town's Finance Advisory Committee to develop long-range plans so blips like these do not pop up in the future.

?I don't think I could support anything else until we look at this through the Finance Advisory Committee,? said Mayor Dawe.