

Joint Ops Centre is 'wrong direction' for Aurora: opposition

By Brock Weir

Aurora needs new facilities for public works staff, but the recently approved Joint Operations Centre on Industrial Parkway North is not the way to do it, argued Councillors opposed to the project last week.

While they agreed on the need, for Councillors Evelyn Buck, John Gallo, and Wendy Gaertner, their main opposition stemmed from cost, location, and all the 'bells and whistles' slated to become a part of the new facility.

'The building is decked out like a Christmas tree,' said Councillor Buck of the building, which is expected to include numerous items to ensure it meets the environmental LEED Gold certification. 'Every falderal Council could think of, every little luxury was brought out. [The current facilities on Scanlon Court] was a prefab metal building, it certainly owes us nothing and it certainly needs to be replaced. Yes, we have more staff, yes, we are taking care of our own fleet [but] the fact is the majority of the responsibilities of the Public Works and Parks departments are not done in the building. It is done out there in the community.'

'I don't discount the need for a new facility, but I don't agree it has been managed well.'

To illustrate this point, Councillor Buck said she still objected to the Parks Department being 'turfed' out of the former home of Aurora Hydro, which now serves as Aurora's new armoury. That was a move which failed to 'serve the community well', she said. The land sale of the current yard on Scanlon Court was also not handled well in her view, she added, noting the sale should have been up to competitive bid.

'I don't agree that we bought a good site [for the new facility] and had to spend millions remediating it to make it a site that was usable,' she continued. 'I don't agree that is a good location. There are a number of things that do not allow me to have confidence that this building was well-planned. I don't argue that it is needed, I don't argue that our employees are entitled to adequate facilities in order to carry out their responsibilities. I don't argue that it isn't a good investment in the future. It is an essential investment in the future.'

Similar views were put forward by Councillor John Gallo who, rather than arguing against the need for the facility, argued against the 'form' of the planned JOC. This objection to form was not only physical, but also fiscal towards the model put forward to pay the building's hefty price tag.

With the majority of the \$26 million price tag coming from future development charges coming out of the thousands of homes slated for development on Aurora's 2C lands, he said earmarking this money now could create a 'vacuum' for the future.

'It creates a void in terms of future projects that we could be spending money on,' he said. 'In terms of the balance of the funding for this project, other than Scanlon Court I haven't seen anything in terms of selling our Leslie Street lands other than Bulk Barn. We felt very confident we were going to sell the lands. I don't believe we feel confident anymore because I haven't seen any movement and I would have liked to have seen better explanation of the status of our Leslie Street Lands.'

'My math tells me with all the bells and whistles, this project is roughly \$10 million over budget from when we first started and I clearly have a huge concern with that. It is the largest capital project this municipality has ever spent and the final tendering is weeks before an election and I have a big issue with that.'

Councillor Gallo then made a motion to defer a decision on the JOC to the next term of Council, but this was ultimately rejected.

Also objecting to the 'ballooning costs' was Councillor Gaertner, who underscored what she felt was the 'need' for a new facility.

'We needed to have it a while ago, and I was in favour of the original price tag,' she explained. 'I can't support the ballooning costs for this. I would like to build a new JOC for Aurora. I would like our staff to have a new JOC, but I do not believe we can afford it'

as planned. It will be the first time in 10 years that we have used debt financing and the plans to use the proceeds from the Leslie Street lands obviously is something we shouldn't be counting on. We have a policy that governs how our land should be sold. This should have been a competitive bid for our Scanlon land and I also agree that we bought the wrong land for the wrong price.?

Additional objections brought forward included the concept of whether using Development Charges, fees ultimately paid by developers to the municipality ? as well as the Region ? were ultimately coming out taxpayers' pockets as developers have to recoup those fees from somewhere, as well as the need for a third floor of ?shell space? for future office use.