

## "Lower" concept approved for Library Square



The last Council meeting of the year signalled the dawn of a new day for Library Square as lawmakers approved a lowered concept for Library Square.

Going into Tuesday night's meeting, Council members were faced with two concept plans.

The two plans, presented at last week's General Committee, offered two distinctly bold visions for the area, now currently occupied by the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street and flanked by landmarks the Aurora Cultural Centre, Victoria Hall, and the current Library building.

Once the demolition of the two disused buildings on Victoria Street is complete, the concept plans for an overhaul of the area between the Library at Yonge and Church and the Aurora Cultural Centre further east on Church Street.

In the first plan, a public square will be built level to the street level of the Aurora Cultural Centre with parking reconfigured beneath a platform that would be flush with the bottom of the Library's second floor. This would allow for an extensive public space in the public square itself, as well as a new entrance to the public library. Additional parking would be located on the present site of the former Seniors' Centre while the old Library would be razed for a new community building extending the Aurora Cultural Centre. The cost for Option 1 is just over \$15million.

Clocking in just under \$3 million less than the first is Option 2, dubbed the "lower square." The Second Option would take public parking completely to the site of the old seniors centre and building the public square to the level of the Library's Church Street entrance. Bordered on all sides by the two Church Street landmarks, the lower square would create a bowl shape, allowing for amphitheatre-style seating along the perimeter, all surrounding a public space.

Council tentatively backed Option 2 at last week's meeting but, requesting further information on both options in time for this week's meeting, the final decision was left open-ended.

But a presentation last week by Nancy Eveleigh Brown, Chair of the Aurora Public Library Board, which is firmly in the camp of Option 1, hoped to sway their opinion.

"Parking is an ongoing issue in the area," she said. "Our staff park in the surrounding streets to free up spaces for our customers. We currently have two accessible parking spots right outside our door and there is a demand for more. The seniors and young families being strong users of the library, we have to ensure that our users are able to access the library with relative ease. Concept 2 does not provide for either of these, with fewer total parking spaces than we currently have and all of them further from the door."

The second option, she said, would involve reconfiguring the interior of the library to accommodate new routes for shipping and receiving, which would ultimately result in the loss of one community room within the building. Option 1 leaves shipping and receiving as is, and would ultimately increase accessibility.

"This may cost a little bit more now, but it would be a wise investment for the future of Aurora," she said, adding a raised public square would offer an integrated entrance to the library on its second floor. "This not only provides a more welcoming and open entrance to the Library, but also connects the Library directly to the square. This raised placement of the Town Square creates a friendlier and more welcoming space as the Cultural Centre building would not be three storeys high as it would be in Concept 2. The square would be warmer and sunnier, extending the usability of the space into the spring or fall. With the additional parking lot north of the proposed new building, there would be more parking spaces than there currently are, better suited to serve four event spaces: the library, the cultural centre, town square and the new building."

"There is," she concluded, "only one chance to get this right."



This was the prevailing view around the Council table as well, but there were differing views on just what was 'right'.

After Councillor John Abel's calls to go out to tender for a third option, possibly with new planners behind it, was rejected by Council, he said he would ultimately back the Library's position.

'I would vote for what the Library recommends and they recommend the one with the deck for obvious reasons,' he said. 'I appreciate what professional opinions we're getting, but the Library is the gem, the biggest part of this whole exercise, and we have our professional director coming forward and telling us that's the one she prefers. I would have to support that concept.'

Councillor Harold Kim, however, had a slightly different perspective.

'I think the gem of the block is really the land between the Library and the Cultural Centre and what it will turn out to be,' he said, adding he was initially in favour of Option 1 as it would cause minimal disruption to the Library. 'When I took a closer look at it, I [thought], who is this Square serving? It's not for the Cultural Centre, it's not for the Library, although they are important partners; it is all the residents of Aurora. It has to be a practical space, it has to be aesthetically pleasing and it has to be pleasing enough for people to want to come forward and create traffic.'

'Ultimately, when you have more traffic in the Square, it is going to ultimately benefit the library and the Cultural Centre because they are going to increase their human footprint.'

Other Councillors were more guarded in their opinions ahead of what could be this week's final vote.

Councillor Pirri came into the meeting favouring Option 1, he said, but he wanted more information about the long-term viability of each option and if there is room for further development 30 or 40 years down the line.

Mayor Geoff Dawe was also looking for more information on accessibility concerns voiced by the Library before he made a final decision, while Councillor Sandra Humfryes said she understood the concerns and was leaning towards Option 1 as well.

'I think at the end of the day we're going to make a decision of what we feel is in the best interests of the community as a whole and I think we're all waiting to get some further information' and have a fulsome discussion round the table with my colleagues when we go from concept to reality,' concluded Councillor Michael Thompson.