

Process defended in Armoury deal with Niagara College

By Brock Weir

Aurora Council threw out the welcome mat for representatives of Niagara College last week, whose Canadian Institute of Food and Wine will be the centrepiece of upcoming renovations to the Town's historic armoury.

But as warm a welcome they received, last Tuesday's General Committee meeting was a chance for Council members to defend the negotiation process leading up to the lease deal, a process which was subject to criticism from Councillor John Abel and some members of the public.

'Like all commercial transactions, it is neither prudent or efficient to try and negotiate those in public for either party,' said Town CAO Doug Nadorozny, adding it was the view of all parties concerned that it was in everyone's 'best interests' to explore the details in private until a deal was reached. 'Once the lease was signed by both parties, the details were made public a couple of days after that.'

'As Council knows, Council was properly informed in closed session as permitted by the Municipal Act as it relates to the negotiation of leases by municipalities. On two occasions, specifically Council directed staff to proceed on the terms we had suggested. As these sorts of deals go, you can't negotiate in a glass fishbowl when you're trying to get the interests of two parties to be aligned and, in the end, I think we did that and we did so with the support of Council. The proof will be in the pudding when the community sees the value of this partnership and sees the benefits that accrue, I don't think there will be any concerns about the fact the initial steps had to be in a closed environment.'

While Councillor Abel has been one of the most vocal opponents of the deal, even when details of what he was objecting to were still the subject of closed door talks, he told members at last week's meeting that discussing the agreement itself 'is probably a debate for another time' but efforts could have been made to show 'residents we were open and transparent.'

Nevertheless, he said he was 'very impressed' by a presentation made near the start of the meeting by representatives from Niagara College, as well as the municipal staff who steered the deal forward.

'As far as the comments about the nature of how we do the process, there are always different ways we can choose to go forward,' said Councillor Abel. 'They can proceed in closed session and make it available for public consumption. My feeling is if we were starting down this road, we could have asked a year ago for a report saying, 'Let's go for a post secondary, let's put a budget out, let's put some locations out, and let's make that public.' I am sure any college would have allowed a This slideshow could not be started. Try refreshing the page or viewing it in another browser. as Niagara did, but what we have committed for in the culinary is fantastic. 'Our strategic plan does cover incubation and IT and a medical campus and all kinds of things that are in there. A culinary, at first blush, takes a bit to understand, but I can certainly see outreaching to our restaurants and businesses to give them the advantage of all the opportunities and education that can be provided to make us probably a much better restaurant or go-to destination. We need that here. We need a light and I am very pleased to say I am confident Niagara will be able to do that.'

Other Council members were more fulsome in their support for the deal and the process, including Mayor Geoff Dawe who said he had 'absolutely no concerns' with the process.

'If there have been any issues, we have our Clerk and our Solicitor who would have stopped us in our tracks to say we are not approaching this in the way we should have, so I have no concerns with that at all,' said the Mayor. 'With the exception of one person, the comments have been overwhelmingly positive. There is just a huge amount of excitement this has created and it has fantastic long-term potential for where we want to see the Town of Aurora going.'

'We actually had conversations with four post-secondary institutions and, for whatever reason, those did not come to fruition. I think we have more than met our challenge for due diligence and to ensure we're bringing value. When we purchased the Armoury in 2014, I think we all had a vision. I can't really enunciate what my vision was, but this sure fits it. I am very excited and very excited about getting this on the road to bring new life in the area.'

The potential for 'new life' in the area was a strong factor for Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said there are 'many spin-offs' that can develop from this partnership with Niagara College.

'This is something we have taken a giant step towards that buzzword everyone always uses 'revitalization of the downtown core,' he said. 'When you enter a partnership there has to be value on both sides and there has to be something both sides get out of it and I think Niagara College is getting something out of it because they are entering a market they weren't part of. We're getting the benefit of an experienced, well-established post-secondary institution coming to our town and creating an economic benefit to the whole town. I think there is excitement in the air throughout the whole town.'