

Stakeholders, neighbours raise concerns over Library Square proposals

By Brock Weir

Proposed plans to replace the soon-to-be-demolished former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street with Library Square left neighbours with more questions than answers at Town Hall last week.

Representatives from the neighbouring Aurora Cultural Centre and the current incarnation of the Aurora Public Library, as well as members of the public at large, converged on Town Hall last week to speak out on two options which would allow for extensions onto the Aurora Cultural Centre and Victoria Hall, with a new parking lot and water feature.

The two options offered by consultants FOTENN proposed significant changes to the current parking configuration enjoyed by the Library and the Cultural Centre.

The first of two options suggested replacing the two Victoria Street buildings with a parking lot of nearly 80 spaces, turning the current Aurora Public Library parking lot into a landscaped area with water feature.

The second option dramatically reduced the existing Library parking to 20 spaces adjacent to the building with a pick up/drop off roundabout and adding additional parking onto the site of the former seniors' centre.

Both options left much to be desired in the eyes of the Aurora Public Library Board.

Responding to the first option, Board Chair Nancy Eveleigh Brown said the plan did not take shipping and receiving vehicles into the equation, nor adequate access for persons with mobility challenges, seniors, and other, who might find steps or a slope down from Library Square parking to the library itself a potential problem.

“The concept drawings seem to show a series of stairs or a stepped-down path down from the upper lot,” she said. “This makes access during inclement weather challenging. Parents with strollers, young children, or anyone with mobility issues might find getting to the Library difficult. Seniors are strong Library users and the lack of convenient parking could have a negative impact on their use of the Library. In general, it is a significant barrier to the ease of use of the Library.

“Inadequate parking at the Library continues to be a top complaint for users. The Library lot is currently used for a wide variety of purposes other than Library use and Library clientele are fortunate if they can find parking for their visit now. An increase of four spots in an area far removed from the Library is not an improvement.”

The second option, she said, was not an improvement either; far from it, leaving only 20 parking spots adjacent to the Library, plus the proposed additional lot to the northeast.

“If current parking patterns continue, the upper parking lot will see heavy usage by people not visiting the Library,” she said. “A reduction in available parking from 72 parking spaces to 45 will add to frustration and customer dissatisfaction. The Library is an anchor store in the downtown core. It draws people to the area and supports commercial and retail activity. If either option is enacted there is a real potential for the Library to experience decreased usage. The Library is a successful, thriving municipal service located in the area targeted for growth. The parking provisions proposed in the concept plan do not provide the infrastructure needed to support that growth.”

Eric Acker, Vice President of the Aurora Cultural Centre Board, said he also agreed parking was an issue that needed to be addressed.

“I am not here to tell you what the solution to the parking problem is, but we are certainly prepared to work with whoever we are asked to work with, but there needs to be a solution found to parking in that overall area,” he said. “In principle, our Executive Committee supports the recommendations that have been put forward tonight because they provide direction for a way forward.” Additional space for the Cultural Centre, he added, would help them help the Town achieve its cultural objectives.

For nearby resident Susan Morton-Leonard, there was a significant piece of the puzzle missing, particularly how the two additions might be used. In her view, it was a stumbling block in local lawmakers making an informed decision.

More thought should be given on looking at how Library Square might work in the larger context of the Cultural Precinct, she added, particularly when it comes to the expansion of GO Service already on the horizon.

“Aurora grew from a small hamlet to a town because of being the last stop on the train,” said Ms. Morton-Leonard. “If there is something exciting to visit, people will once again get off the train here in Aurora much less maybe even consider meeting here. Seek funding from both the province and the federal government for the precinct. We know it will be expensive, but we want a better, much fuller plan, not just a portion to satisfy political need. If you want a lasting legacy look beyond the next election.

“It is becoming more and more apparent that we need to have all levels of government working together [along with residents] to be able to produce these really novel and interesting spaces for people to want to come to.”