

Tough questions expected this week before Library Square decision

By Brock Weir

Local lawmakers may have tentatively approved a three-story addition to the Church Street School as a centrepiece to Library Square last week, but planners and staff will face tough questions this week before ? and if ? this decision is ratified.

Last week, Council signed off on an extensive vision for Library Square, a new public space that is envisioned to become a significant community gathering space.

Bordered in the west by the Aurora Public Library and the Church Street School in the east, Library Square will encompass significant public space between the two landmarks, a seasonal skating rink, a new parking configuration and, in a feature which courted the most discussion at the Committee level last week, a three-storey addition to the Church Street School, comprising of community and studio space, as well as a 250 seat theatre.

While many Council members said this project, which could cost upwards of \$17 million once final designs are completed and approved, said this was the right investment at the right time, others said it completely missed the mark.

?I think we can do far better,? said Councillor John Abel on the designs presented last week, arguing that the designs proposed would hinder the operations of the Aurora Public Library. ?I am all in favour of a Library Square, don't get me wrong. I have been for both terms I have been here. My priority is the Library. It's an absolute necessity and community hub. Whatever we do, we should be able to compliment what they do and not hinder them.?

Moving the parking lot from the back of the building to Victoria Street, as envisioned in the Library Square proposal, will do just that, he argued, reviving his position from last year that the Library Square open space would be a better fit for Victoria Street rather than in between the two buildings.

The parking lot issue also presented accessibility issues, he said, adding he did not see the need for a theatre within the plan.

?We just had baseball come forward with all their metrics on how they need more diamonds, but I don't see a dance studio saying they need more dance space, I don't see Theatre Aurora coming to us and saying, ?we're operating at maximum capacity, we need another theatre.' Why do we need a theatre? Because we can build it, I guess.

?We don't need to build this, quite frankly, and we don't need to disrupt the business of the Library. If we just took a step back and gave ourselves an option, heard from our Cultural Centre, their Strategic Plans, our Museum's plans, incorporate Victoria Hall, I am sure we would have something far less expensive.?

With the money they save, he contended, they could ?just take the roof off? Theatre Aurora on Henderson Drive and create an extension.

?Fiscal prudence is why I am not in favour of this,? he concluded.

Some Council members, on the other hand, said they took ?offence? at the suggestion that they would make a decision that would hinder the Library, including many incumbent members who have served on the Library Board this term or in previous sessions.

?I was on the Library Board for seven years, chaired it for four years, so I think if anyone has a fairly good sense of how this Library operates and [its] value to the community, I think I can claim that,? said Mayor Geoff Dawe. ?I can't see how, in any way, this would impede the Library. I can't make that connection.?

Mayor Dawe said the concept of including a theatre in the proposal came from both himself and Councillor Michael Thompson, adding the ?world class? programs currently fostered by the Aurora Cultural Centre deserve a world class facility for musicians to play.

?I don't think we do these people justice by not providing a world class facility for them to play in,? Mayor Dawe continued. ?The crowds would love to have that facility, so I think it would be a fabulous and incredible draw. I think it would just be unbelievably good for the quality of people we have coming to our Town. This is, in my opinion, the right facility at the right time in the right place. We are bringing, I think, an incredible advantage to our Town and that is what we have to focus on: What is our differentiator? I think this is going to be one of the differentiators. My father always used to say, ?A cynic is a person who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing.' This is the right place at the right time.?

This was a view somewhat shared by Councillor Paul Pirri.

While he took exception to the ?inference? that moving forward would ?damage? the Library, he was less enthusiastic about the theatre proposal, contending that larger theatres in neighbouring municipalities were struggling.

?I worry a bit about the saturation levels, [but] with that said, I am willing to consider what we have on the table,? said Councillor Pirri. ?I think event space would be fantastic to have and I am sure that's why [a] theatre is being promoted and set up in the way that

it is to allow for that space, so we don't have to travel outside of Aurora to hold big events anymore ? and that is the important thing.?

As the longest currently serving Council member, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she didn't think anyone at the table could say ?they have worked as hard or as long? to make Library Square a reality. While she said the proposal before them was ?great?, it was not ?perfect? and she questioned the financial wisdom of going forward at this time.

?In my opinion, we need to build a business case on this,? she said. ?We need to have an operating model. We need to look for partners who can help us with the operating costs. This is going to be, long-term, a very expensive building to operate [and] I think we need to look at the operating costs. It needs to be a fulsome discussion and a fiscally responsible one. With the information that I have ? and I love the design and think modern works well with the old ? I am not going to approve a budget of more than \$20 million when we don't have any detailed costing.

?I think the Library would have liked it to be otherwise, but they are agreeing to do this because Council has voted to do this, and it is going to be wonderful for the downtown core, including the Library. We really need to know what's what before we make any financial decisions.?