

Up next for Library Square and Cultural Precinct: Vision

By Brock Weir

A site plan for Library Square could be ready for approval as early as this fall, following Council approval this week. Lawmakers signed off on a contract with The Planning Partnership which, as The Auroran reported last week, will task the consultants to prepare a site plan for the large swath of land on Victoria Street currently occupied by the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre, while conducting stakeholder and community consultation along the way. While the future of Library Square has been the subject of discussion for nearly two decades, this latest step has been on the front burner since May when Council tasked staff with procuring design services. \$500,000 was set in the budget for the demolition of the two buildings currently on-site, along with detailed design services. The Planning Partnership's winning bid came in at \$132,635. Despite being a hot-button election issue in 2014 and the subject of numerous hours of Council discussion, this latest step cleared last week's meeting without a word of discussion. What did capture Council's attention was a wider-ranging step on the development of the Town's Cultural Precinct, of which Library Square is a key component: accessing Hydro Reserves to take the Precinct to the next level. Council signed off on setting in motion a process which will formally give notice to members of the public that they might have reason to access the proceeds from the sale of Aurora Hydro as early as this fall. The Hydro Reserves were created from the sale of the public utility and subject to a stringent process on how the community is notified about their potential use and how they can become involved in the process. Now that the ball is rolling, it gives members of the public at least 30 days to register their interest in the Funds with the Clerk's office so they can stay up to date and ultimately have their say. ?There have been a number of conversations around this table both in Closed Session and in Open Session with regards to some potential opportunities Council faces which may require Hydro funding,? Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, told Council last week. ?Some of those decisions may be coming forward in a fairly time-sensitive manner, when they become open, so we reviewed this with our solicitor to make sure we were on side with [the bylaw].? Giving this notice now would prevent further delays down the road, he said. ?[The notice will] connect with those who are interested in following the issue at this time, get them to sign up and we will notify them,? he continued. ?The intent of our communications group is once we have notified those individuals directly by email to their personal accounts we will also be broadcasting?to the broad community to say Hydro funds [will be on the agenda]. We are trying to manage the timelines we anticipate Council may be faced with.? While staff and councillors alike were mum on what these possibilities might be, some Councillors were keen to ensure this would not put them under any stress to make a rash decision. ?This has been going on since 2000 and I am not interested in making any financial decisions under the gun,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?I don't want to be in a position where I have to make a quick turnaround of a week or 10 days to try and decide how to spend a lot of money.? From the perspective of Councillor Michael Thompson, this public notice is all about managing public expectations. ?I think it is prudent given all the discussions we've had, but I also think it is important to note that while, in my opinion, the use of the hydro reserves makes sense [to the things we are discussing] it doesn't necessarily mean we have to use it,? he said. ?It is a Council choice. Council still has to make a decision whether or not we have to go the route to use those Hydro Reserve funds to support whatever community initiatives [will be considered] but we're not necessarily forced to do so. We could have an array of options in front of us.? Councillor John Abel was of a similar mindset, adding: ?The idea is to give [the public] engagement opportunities and to get some buy-in from the community that we're using the fund and we're using it for such-and-such and give them the pros and benefits for such an item. I want to be sure that even though the funding is there, there will be discussions and there will be full public notice of what it is we're doing.? Council received those assurances, with Mr. Elliott noting that there is a ?reasonable? expectation that some of the opportunities ?will come to fruition in the coming months? and any forthcoming report will provide ample information, including funding alternatives ? with the important certainty that the Hydro Reserves will be one such option; the option suggested by staff.