

\$4.9 million Armoury renovation set for Council approval

By Brock Weir

A \$4.9 million plan to complete the transformation of the historic Aurora Armoury into a new campus for Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute, plus community space, is set to receive the go-ahead from Council this week.

Sitting at the Committee level last Tuesday, Council members gave the green light to increasing the renovation's budget to \$4,883,800, money which will come out of Aurora's Hydro Reserves, money garnered from the sale of Aurora Hydro and earmarked to build or grow community assets.

Once ratified by Council this week, designs for the revamp will be approved, and these entail a 32 seat classroom and meeting space on the north side of the building, located at the northeast corner of Town Park, a 250 person multipurpose space in the centre of the building, a 12 seat kitchen and demonstration area at the south side of the building, and opening up the west side of the Armoury into Town Park.

The decision to move forward was approved by the majority of Council. While Councillor Harold Kim was not in attendance to cast his vote, Councillor John Abel, a long-time opponent of the Town's lease agreement with Niagara College, reiterated his position.

'I am standing for the taxpayers because it is their money we're using on this,' said Councillor Abel. 'Having a culinary school is a good idea, but I think we're subjecting the taxpayer to an excessive amount of the subsidy. We're paying the full shot. Niagara College is committing service in kind of \$500,000 but they are not contributing a cent to the capital investment here. It is being fully subsidized by us and we're investing to their benefit. Clearly, this is not a wise use of our taxpayer money.'

Countering this position was Mayor Geoff Dawe, who took aim at Councillor Abel's argument that this was about taxpayer money. 'This is coming from the Hydro Reserves [which was] garnered by selling a significant Town asset to PowerStream,' said Mayor Dawe. 'I have always been of the opinion that the money from the Hydro Fund should be invested back into something that returns a substantial asset to the Town of Aurora because we all benefit from that. I firmly believe this is one of those projects and I believe the benefits are fabulous.'

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was of a similar view to Mayor Dawe, adding she thought it is a 'wise use of money' while Councillor Tom Mrakas said while his colleague criticized the 'subsidy,' the Town has to spend money to renovate and update the nearly-150-year-old building anyway.

'At the end of the day we're going to have to [renovate] regardless of who is in there, whether it is a user group, community partners we're going to have to pay this bill to renovate and that is the idea,' he said. I remember being with Councillor Abel at the beginning of this term and we walked through there and said we would love to see doors that fold open and open to the park, we would love to see a fully equipped kitchen, washroom, and when I look at this drawing it is exactly what the two of us had discussions about. We are building what we had vision to build there. The only difference is we've decided we're going to lease it to someone and bring it in.

'While there might be some subsidies at the beginning, [Niagara College is] paying a pretty hefty bill and I don't think there is any user group out there that is willing to pay that bill right now.'

Councillor Mrakas also argued in favour of what he and many of his colleagues have said will be the economic benefits Niagara College and the Canadian Food & Wine Institute will bring to Aurora. These benefits, he said, only help the revitalization of Aurora's downtown core and aid local businesses.

'I am certainly supportive of the motion before us,' added Councillor Michael Thompson. 'I do agree this project is in the best interests of the Town. It has been debated numerous times. We have all stated our positions [of why] we feel it is in the best interests of the Town.'

Councillor Abel, on the other hand, remained unconvinced.

He, along with Councillors Gaertner, Thompson and Paul Pirri, raised questions on a number of the design elements, from the durability of various roofing options to the level of accessibility in planned new washrooms, but, at the end of the day, the idea was a non-starter, he said.

'I did share a great vision with Councillor Mrakas when we first came on term,' Councillor Abel contended. 'When we walked through the Armoury, we thought, 'What a great acquisition we have here for our community.' That community space has been eliminated, so that wasn't part of our vision. We're investing in a third party, and good for them. If we had gone to 17 other culinary schools that exist, we might have been able to get a better package than what we did. We never had that opportunity, nor did we ever do that. That is called looking out for the best interests of your taxpayer.'