

After delay, residents can judge Joint Operations Centre for themselves



By Brock Weir

Aurora residents will soon have a chance to judge for themselves whether the Town needs a new Joint Operations Centre.

Councillors and Town Staff will be on hand at the current works yard on Scanlon Court, just off Industrial Parkway North next Saturday, February 8 to go over details for the proposed \$20 million replacement site near St. John's Sideroad, combining the works yard with the Parks Department, as well as gauge public feedback.

The open house was scheduled last week after a contentious discussion at Council last week which saw Councillors hold off on approving the plan for at least 30 days to engage the public and also bring forward further suggestions on how ballooning costs can be shaved down.

Councillor Paul Pirri made the initial motion to put a 30 day freeze on the project so Councillors objecting to the plan could bring their suggestions for the table, but Councillor Michael Thompson said he saw value in a delay for a different reason.

"I think we need to utilize that time to communicate better with the residents on why this is really necessary and why it has been on our docket for three years," said Councillor Thompson. "Council has [recognized] the fact the Scanlon Court works yard has not been sufficient since 2004.

"What concerns me the most, and not just the escalating costs, is the perception out there with the residents of why we are doing this," he added, referring to comments made earlier this month by Councillor Chris Ballard at a Special Committee Meeting held specifically to tackle the Joint Ops issue. "When you hear comments [comparing it] to a 'Taj Mahal' that is not an honest portrayal. I think we need to do a better job of communicating to the residents the whys, the whats, the hows, and the rationale."

A public open house, he added, would afford residents an opportunity to see the current conditions at the Scanlon Court site, gain some information from Town Staff and architects, why it has taken nearly 10 years to get to this point, and "help them understand why it is so expensive."

Councillors were generally in favour of taking that extra time to focus on communications as well as the bones of contention around the table which focus predominantly on costs - expanding from a previously budgeted estimate of just over \$14 million, to a price tag now of \$19 million plus costs associated with land - and a detailed plan to debt finance the whole project, waiting for Development Charges and money from future land sales to once again flow into municipal coffers.

"We owe it to take time so everyone understands it," said Councillor John Abel. "When Council embarks on something this important, [we need] to get together and come in with a unanimous approach to it and not be divided. We need a facility. Every community needs a Public Works and Parks and Recreation Facility and it should be energy efficient and it should be strategically

located. It should be understood that there are two parts to our job: one is managing the taxpayers' money and the other is managing development charges that go into the long-term planning of our community for infrastructure and communities.?

For Councillor Sandra Humfryes, one of the most important factors in this debate is to provide the public with ?a clear financial plan? and what the ultimate tax burden will be.

?That needs to be very clear so that residents understand that and, secondly, the incredible need that is out there,? she said. ?It is a huge capital investment, it is something we need to service our community properly and I really appreciate the opportunity to send this back to staff to fill in those gaps so we are very comfortable.?

One Councillor, however, not buying into the delay was Councillor Evelyn Buck. She said focusing on communications in this way was selling voters short.

?I think Councillors are vastly underestimating the intelligence of the people who are paying attention,? she said. ?I think they understand very well.?

At the January 7 meeting, Councillor Buck was one of four Councillors, along with Councillors Chris Ballard, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo, who left midway through the session claiming going forward with the Joint Ops Centre was a done deal and that their arguments against the plan, particularly the escalating costs, were not being heard around the table.

Last week, Councillor Pirri addressed this walk-out, stating he was disappointed he didn't hear suggestions from these Councillors on what could be done.

?Raise them now so we can get some extra information,? he said. ?I found what happened last week extremely upsetting because we all come here to make decisions.?

Such solutions, he said, could include public private partnerships to share the cost of the site.

Councillor John Gallo said although he wasn't prepared to put forward his suggestions last week and would have them ready when it is discussed again next month, he said he was encouraged by the discussion around the table.

?This appears to be a very different approach to our last meeting and that is where my frustration lies,? he said. ?I listened very carefully to Councillor Pirri and I took his comments to heart. I never wanted to be that Councillor that just brought problems and not solutions and I have been working towards that to present solutions that I want to explore regarding this project.?

The Open House will be held at 9 Scanlon Court on Saturday, February 8 from 11.30 a.m. to 2 p.m. A site tour and free barbeque lunch will be included.