

Approval of Library Square concept signals start of design process

By Brock Weir

Now that Council has approved a 'lowered square' concept for Library Square, which is planned to include amphitheatre-style seating, a multi-use public gathering space, and expansion of the Aurora Cultural Centre, now it's time for the public to weigh in on the fine details.

Council approved the 'bowl' concept for the new public area last week, a concept which is estimated to clock in around \$12 million, likely to be funded out of Aurora's Hydro Reserves.

For many members of Council, this was a step in the right direction, and a step that was a long time coming.

For Councillor John Abel, the one lawmaker to vote against the concept, the approved 'Option Two' was not backed by the Aurora Public Library and was, therefore, not the right path forward.

'We have a Library that has 225,000 visitors with lots of children and seniors, and then we have the Cultural Centre with 30,000 visitors,' he said. 'My idea would be to accommodate the Library.'

The planned addition to the Aurora Cultural Centre, he added, should rather be an addition to the Library to address their needs. Along with that, and the concerns the Library has expressed about parking, the decision to go forward with Option Two 'is we're making everything difficult for them: their traffic flow, their parking, and it is really going to impede on one of the great, strong vibrant facilities that this Town has.'

He reiterated his proposal to go out once again for a further design concept, one which would leave the current parking configuration between the Library and the Cultural Centre in place, while working on overhauling the swath of Library Square currently under demolition, as the preferred space for Library Square itself.

'I can't support this because the stakeholders are telling me not to,' said Councillor Abel. 'The seniors are telling me not to [with the concerns over accessible parking] and that is all I need. I was elected to as they tell me and it is not about being for Library Square or against it. We should work, engage and consult.'

In addition, Councillor Abel said, 'next summer, [when] the dust hits, I am going to say I was not in favour of doing this.'

This sparked criticism from some Council members who said Councillor Abel's opposition was clouded by electioneering.

'I think something I have thought for a while has just been confirmed: we have a Councillor who is admitting he's making a decision so that he can raise his hand and say he voted against this at election time, which is fine,' said Councillor Paul Pirri. 'Everyone has their own motives for making decisions around the Council table.'

Councillor Pirri said his motives for voting in favour of Option Two were from a 'fiscal' standpoint. A raised square option, rejected by Council, would cost an additional \$100,000 every five years in upkeep, and almost \$250,000 every ten years, he said.

'That is just the financial side on top of the \$3 million or so investment it would take to get that moving forward. If you look at this from an accessibility standpoint, no option is perfect,' he said. 'I think that if we're looking at this objectively, we're increasing accessible parking that is there now, which is going above and beyond what we already have. We're doing our best to accommodate parking close by because everyone around the Council table will agree that is important and we need to ensure that is available for our residents, both if you're a young parent or a senior.'

This was the general feeling around the table.

Councillor Michael Thompson, long an advocate for moving forward on Library Square before the end of this Council term, said staff and architects both favour the lower square option as the best plan for the community and modifications brought forward between the previous Tuesday and last week's Council meeting addressed many of their concerns.

'By no means do I see it as a final design,' he said. 'I still think there is more to do around access and accessibility and I think as we move through the process that we're still at the 5,000 foot level. There are still plenty of opportunities to explore that feedback and work through those issues. I spoke to a member of the Library Board and they said, 'There is only one chance to get this right,' but I think we will.'

Councillor Harold Kim also stressed the opportunities ahead for further consultation during the design process. Sufficient input and 'imagination' will provide more options for both the Library and Cultural Centre going forward, he said.

'Will there ever be a design that will be 100 per cent perfect for all stakeholders?' he offered. 'There won't be. We have to try and find a design that is as best as possible for all stakeholders.'

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

'It is no secret that this is a really, really hard decision for us and I think as Councillors we need to listen to our residents, our

stakeholders, our professional advisors and to ourselves to try and make what we think is the best decision for our community and all of us around the table are trying to do that, no matter what our opinion. I am very pleased with the improvements that were made [to parking] and I think we need to keep trying to improve this. The improvement is especially important to the Library.

?I think at the end of the day it is going to be very well received and hopefully loved by the whole community. I have that feeling of excitement within myself and we have been talking about this for a very long time. I have said from the beginning of the term that I hoped this would be the Council that finally made a decision because it is a very hard decision to make and here we are.?

Library Square was a project resumed once again at the beginning of this Council term, envisioned through the lens of a greater Cultural Precinct plan. Now it is starting to bear fruit, said Councillor Tom Mrakas, and although there are some outstanding issues with Option 2, it ticks the boxes of what people have been talking about through extensive public consultation.

?Yes, there are some issues with it as far as parking and accessibility, but I think some of those concerns have been addressed in one week's time period,? he said. ?I think moving forward, it will allow us to refine it even more, as has been stated and I think we will get to that point where we'll get to that point and it will be perfect. It is what we all thought and we all envisioned. Yes, we need to work on it and we'll get there, but it is what is in the best interests of this community.?

Mayor Dawe shared the view that this is all a work in progress.

?It is a concept plan that we're dealing with,? he said. ?We will indeed come back with drawings that will go through the whole site plan approval. We are very committed to getting it right and we welcome your input always.?