

Armoury deal lacked public input, say history advocates

By Brock Weir

A lease deal that will transform the historic Armoury into a branch of the Canadian Institute of Food and Wine lacked transparency, according to heritage advocates who proposed an alternative use for the historic building last year. Heritage advocates David Heard and Christopher Watts, the latter representing the Aurora Heritage Authority, made their feelings clear as delegates to last week's Council meeting, just days before details of the lease with Niagara College were made public. In their comments, they said keeping the details behind closed doors lacked transparency.

Late last fall, Mr. Watts appeared at Council to pitch his own idea for the Aurora Armoury, a concept he dubbed "The Farmoury." Billed as a way to mark the Canada 150 commemorations, and floated shortly after Council approved moving forward with the Armoury's repurposing, by bringing in an element of "innovation" to the Downtown Core.

Had it been brought to fruition, it would have been an "empowerment centre" which may have appeared as a simple Farmers' Market to some, but he said to get at the whole idea you had to peel back the layers like an onion.

Based on four principles – education, community, exchange and sustainability – it was not only an all-season market, but a facility with a full teaching kitchen to provide education and rental opportunities, seed libraries, day camps focused on the educational power of food and farming, and even a "Hall of Farm" to celebrate local agricultural history.

While the concept announced Friday between the Town and Niagara College's Canadian Institute of Food and Wine incorporates some of these concepts, particularly the education component, the resulting deal was not done with full community consultation, they contended.

"Our modest little Town was built on farming, faith and the fight for freedoms," said Mr. Heard. "It really began with that connection when John Mosley and then reeve Joseph Fleury negotiated the Town Park and eventually the training facility that became the Armoury. [The Farmoury] successfully cherishes our valued history. It was created with passion and research. It was not hurried, it was presented for all to process, but it did not come back to this table. I am very proud to be related to John Mosley and I do believe we do not plough through concepts, plans and issues without full public input. I believe your intentions may have been fully genuine but I have also delegated many times on the Armoury building and the park and pleaded to keep it in full community space, especially community events that may help those in the community."

"[Our community] was built on ideas like those of John Mosley, Joseph Fleury, and Arthur Petch. It was built on teamwork. Community and unity makes plans for a very powerful potential in communities. It brings us together. Powerful ideas come from all walks of life, not just within these walls. We should relish, for those in Aurora who love Aurora to dream of a vision and willing to contribute and be heard."

Added Mr. Watts, speaking to branding brought forward to last week's Council meeting: "In the background of this report, it states the Town intends to invest \$4 million in this exercise. I see this as a prestige redevelopment. I have to wonder why a branding exercise for a project like this would even be attempted in house. I understand there have been a lot of in-camera meetings to deal with the Armoury project. I look forward to finding out more about [this] but staff has not followed up with myself since December 5 or any of the Farmoury task force assembled."