

Armoury lease could come under closer scrutiny, if Councillor gets their way

The Town's lease with Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute for the latter's use of the historic Aurora Armoury could come under closer public scrutiny, if Councillor John Gallo gets his way.

Last week, Council met in Closed Session to discuss two items, including one related to the Armoury's lease agreement, the start of which had been impacted by the global pandemic.

While information of what was discussed remained behind closed doors, the outcome of the decision passed on a vote of 4 ? 3 with Councillors Wendy Gaertner and Rachel Gilliland joining Councillor Gallo in opposition.

?I'll tread lightly [as] there is only a certain amount that we can communicate to the public in closed session,? said Councillor Gallo on why he was voting against the matter. ?I want to publicly communicate that I disagreed with the direction Council took in Closed Session. There was information provided late in the meeting and I had asked for postponement so I could absorb it all. Unfortunately, that didn't move forward. At some point I am sure, through financial reporting, that it will be clear what exactly took place and what tax dollars were used regarding the Armoury lease re-start.

?I want to express my disappointment with this item and that it is moving forward in the manner that it is and I am disappointed with Council members who didn't allow me initial time to understand the new information and give me the time to absorb it and make an informed decision. It is unfortunate that it is almost the last probably meeting of the term and this significant item is placed on [probably] our second last meeting to make these decisions and I wanted the public to know about that.?

Councillor Gilliland agreed, adding: ?For me, I just wanted to have that extra five weeks to review it and just ask some questions, but that didn't happen. My vote could be different, but I am not really sure.?

On the opposite side of the coin, Mayor Tom Mrakas said the information that was provided to Council ?wasn't going to change in six weeks.?

?I had a clear understanding of what was in front of me and I voted accordingly,? he said. ?I think it is for the benefit of the community, our residents, our taxpayers and the Town as a whole.?

The 4-3 passage of the Closed Session item was not the end of the discussion.

During the public portion of the Council meeting, Councillor Gallo attempted to put a motion forward during new business calling on Council and staff to make public the Closed Session reports on the lease once it has been ?signed and completed? by Niagara College.

This faced pushback from Mayor Mrakas, who said New Business wasn't the appropriate place to bring a motion like this forward as it is ?substantive.? Instead, he suggested Councillor Gallo put forward a Notice of Motion for Council members to review.

?I don't think it's proper to bring that New Business and put your colleagues on the spot right now without benefit of hearing from our solicitor in Closed Session,? said the Mayor. ?I won't put it on the floor.?

A challenge by Councillor Gallo on Mayor Mrakas' ruling was not successful.

?If you allowed me to speak I would have addressed those issues, but I have a feeling that we don't really want those details public anyway, even if I put in a Notice of Motion,? said Councillor Gallo. ?I will leave it like that.?

This statement, however, rankled Councillor Michael Thompson who said it was inappropriate for the Councillor to speak for all of

his colleagues.

?He should stick his comments to himself, but I would agree with your [the Mayor's] perception that waiving Closed Session privilege is a substantive motion,? said Councillor Thompson. ?Bring that Notice of Motion forward, Councillor Gallo, and let's have that debate.?

Council is next scheduled to meet in September.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter