

Armoury, Library Square could be funded out of Hydro Reserves

By Brock Weir

A revitalized Aurora Armoury and a completely transformed Library Square could ultimately be their legacy and Council has taken one step forward in freeing up the resources needed to make that happen.

Council last week set in motion the process which could ultimately lead to spending a large chunk of the Town's Hydro Funds, a \$36 million pot of money set aside from the sale of Aurora Hydro to PowerStream in 2005.

Since that time, the initial pot of money has been collecting interest, but it has now been earmarked as a possible source of funds for the \$4 million Armoury renovations, as well as Library Square, which could clock in at an estimated \$10 million.

Council's decision on Tuesday night streamlines the process in making a decision on how this money will ultimately be spent.

Previously, in order to access the money, a vote would require a two-thirds majority of Council. Staff, however, argued this would effectively give one member of Council 'veto power.'

'The intent of the voting rule appears to want all members of Council to be present for the vote,' said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott in his report to Council. 'If any member simply excuses themselves or wanders from the table just prior to the vote, the vote cannot happen. This technically grants veto power to the proposed funding allocation to any one member in this manner. If this happens three meetings in a row, the 'veto through absence' power goes to any two members, which lasts indefinitely. This is clearly in conflict with the two-thirds majority part of the rule and has the potential to stall the initiative of Council where support exists from two-thirds or more of the members.'

This idea was replaced last week with a simple majority of two thirds.

This change was embraced to avoid that so-called hostage situation, although some Council members said they were worried that watering down what was originally intended as a safety measure was a problem when such large amounts of money are being considered.

'When we sold the Hydro utility, the Council of the day was very specific about protecting the money and making sure it was spent for appropriate projects, which really were projects the taxpayers generally would not be able to afford out of our tax money,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'These would be projects in the community interest and the money was protected to make sure that happened. The point of it was all members of Council would be voting for any expense of money.'

'I would appreciate it if Council would honour the original intent of this, which was to make sure the members of Council were all given the chance to vote on the expenditure of moneys. We're talking about an expenditure of a lot of money and I think maybe we should allow that to ride for one or two Council meetings. If we don't have our full contingent of Council members, maybe we need to make some other kind of arrangement.'

Councillor Paul Pirri, on the other hand, saw things from a different perspective.

'I don't necessarily disagree that if we go strictly to a quorum (five out of nine members present at the very least) and two thirds of the quorum that we're not giving members around the table an opportunity,' he said. 'I think that it is a fair comment, but wouldn't it be possible to have a caveat in the bylaw that [it] gets brought to a Council meeting first and if everybody's not able to attend that Council meeting, then at the second meeting, we move onto these rules around quorum?'

Councillor Pirri was on Council in the previous term when bylaws surrounding the expenditure of Hydro funds was last discussed. Looking back on those talks, Councillor Michael Thompson said the strong majority voted in favour of moving towards a two-thirds structure. Moving forward with the alternative on the floor would 'remove the provision to allow one member of Council to stop an initiative from moving forward,' he said.

'I see this amendment really as not so much about the two-thirds, but removing the provision that one member of Council can stall a project, or stonewall it by not attending, that restrictive voting is really at the crux of this change.'

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: 'I think [the second option] is a better option because it does put a little more securities in place to make sure a certain number of members actually vote in the affirmative. What we're looking to [do] is remove one person from holding the whole Council and this community hostage, in essence.'

Councillor John Abel said he had 'no issue with minimizing the restrictive power of one person holding us hostage to the community.'

'In the last term, I was more or less in favour of not allowing that to happen,' he said. 'I understood the spirit of it when it was put in, but I understand how that can be used against you.'

Councillor Abel noted a number of concerns about the pace these changes were brought forward as the recommendations were an

add-on to the previous week's General Committee meeting.

There was, he said, a need to 'move very quickly', with four Council cycles before the summer recess, to get funding in place for the Armoury and Library Square.

But staff noted it is not yet a done deal that either of these projects will be ultimately sourced from Hydro.

'When we were speaking of the Niagara College opportunity in closed session, I don't think any reference was made to using Hydro funds,' said CAO Doug Nadorozny on the lease deal struck between the Town and the College for use of the Aurora Armoury. 'We talked about the fact funding would have to be provided and there would be various ways to look at that, but to enter into the contract with Niagara College was without specific funding identified. I think about a month ago we brought forward a report on all the major projects and ways to fund them using development charges as well as the possibility of Hydro funds.'

Added Councillor Thompson: 'At no time has Council said these projects are going to be funded from the Hydro reserve. We have all along the way throughout this term said they may be a source. If we are going to use it as a source then there are certain procedures that need to be followed and staff are bringing forward some of the stuff now so it is an option for us. When the time comes, Council will make a decision on what is the best way to fund these projects. I appreciate staff taking care of the procedural so at least the option is before Council.'