

Aurora looks at management, programming options for Town Square

With the opening of the Aurora Town Square in 2024, a series of programs and performances aim to gradually scale up over the first three years thanks to a hybrid management model with the Town and the Aurora Cultural Centre.

According to the report prepared by Phil Rose, Aurora's Manager of Cultural Services, the Town hopes to approach its peak programming and rental capacity by 2026, hosting between 15 and 20 performances in the new Performance Hall, running approximately 80 educational programs and administering over 100 rental bookings annually for the various spaces that comprise Town Square.

The report, received by Council at the Committee level on July 4, recommended an operating plan financial strategy for Town Square to be included in the proposed 2024 Budget, and that Council approve in advance of the 2024 operating budget a new full time position that would be funded through savings through a reduction to the Aurora Public Library's ongoing funding requirements.

In the updated Town Square operating budget for 2024 to 2026, the total annual incremental net operating costs is now estimated to be \$1,070,000. The original business plan and financial strategy approved in March 2019 estimated that the net annual operating costs for Town Square would be \$720,000.

A number of factors contributed to the increased annual incremental net operating requirements, including that the 2019 financial strategy was not subject to an inflationary increase and also didn't account for the additional 12 per cent more space (10,000+ sq. ft.) added to the project, which contributed to higher annual facility maintenance costs.

Furthermore, the projected income would be lower as revenue will now be shared by the Aurora Cultural Centre (ACC).

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said that he believes the Council can still go forward with approving the recommended financial strategy; however, more information is needed regarding how the numbers have changed over time.

"So, at least I can connect the dots," he said. "I'm happy to take it offline between now and budget season and have further conversations with [staff] or it can come back to the Finance Advisory Committee, and we can do it collectively. But that's still a missing piece of information for me."

The report also noted a change from a Municipal Services Board (MSB) Model whereby Council would delegate authority to an independent board to operate Town Square, to a Not-for-Profit/Municipal Hybrid Model.

The change to a hybrid model was approved in June 2020 and would allow the Town to share revenues generated in return for assistance in labour and staffing from partners at the Cultural Centre, the Aurora Public Library, and the Aurora Museum & Archives.

Regarding assigned roles, the ACC will be responsible for most programming in the Performance Hall.

The report outlines several decisions for the first year of operations based on the hybrid model such as that the Town will assume responsibility for facility maintenance, IT delivery, customer service, bookings and rental, box office administration, and more.

The ACC would continue to provide base programming focused on performing arts and they will become the main programmer of the performance hall and visual arts studio and will continue to have access to their traditional spaces in the Church Street School.

"Pretty much anything that's happening in the Performance Hall will have some input from the Cultural Centre, either from a programming side as far as them running the program, or them helping with the technical production piece," Rose said.

While negotiations are still ongoing, Rose said that he thinks there is a good understanding so far about what it may look like to be co-tenants of the Town Square. The Town is working on a services agreement to outline the roles and responsibilities with the Cultural Centre and partners, he said.

‘We’ve also always said that it’s going to take us getting into that space and having a year there to work together sort of as co-tenants in that space to figure out exactly where we need to smooth things out. But I think we’re all on the same page right now, in terms of those sort of delineation of duties,’ Rose said.

The original MSB model was created to build a reference for how the Town would manage running the Square, said Town CAO Doug Nadorozny.

‘It was only for a point of reference to establish what would be a reasonable staffing for that, what we think are going to be the operating costs of that new facility, and so on,’ he said.

Concerned issues may arise out of unclear assigned roles between the parties involved, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo said that the current plan feels ‘wishy washy’ and would like to see a specific outline on what everyone’s role will be.

‘I’d like to have a good sense of how this place is going to operate, what everybody’s role is going to be in very precise detail,’ he said

Six new staff positions were proposed in the report that would be onboarded incrementally to limit salary and benefit expenses during the start-up period.

Councillor Gallo questioned whether the additional staff were needed, however Nadorozny replied that the original report from 2019 was based on a hypothetical plan and cautioned comparing the new recommendation to the old one.

Rose added that the number of staff from the plan that was approved in March 2019 was based on the MSB model. He said he will come back with a more fulsome analysis of the financial impact of the new staffing roles.

Councillor Gallo said it wouldn’t be possible to approve all the recommended new staff positions until Council receives more information.

‘Four years have passed since that original business plan was made. Surely in the last four years, someone could have updated the Council,’ he said. ‘Four years in, we are being asked to approve a bunch of financial commitments.’

Mayor Tom Mrakas said they will likely have a deep-dive discussion when the 2024 Budget conversations begin in the fall and looks forward to seeing more in-depth reports in the near future.

‘I think it would be important information for each of us to be able to just pull it up very quickly, instead of just seeing that there was a report there,’ he said. ‘It would be able to answer a lot of the questions that we’re hearing this evening. But I appreciate a lot of the questions that have been asked, and I’m looking forward to having that discussion as we work through the 2024 budget.’

Council approved in advance of the 2024 operating budget a new full-time IT support/Technical Production position to be funded through operational budget savings to be achieved through a planned reduction to the Aurora Public Library’s ongoing funding requirements.

By Elisa Nguyen