

Aurora signs off on next phase of \$26m Joint Ops Centre



By Brock Weir

Aurora's new Joint Operations Centre will proceed, following a lengthy Council debate last week.

Councillors gave the green light to go forward with the next phase of the \$26 million facility, which will combine the Town's Parks and Recreation Department, along with the Works Yard, in a new, larger, and more environmentally friendly building at the top of Industrial Parkway North.

Councillors initially debated the plan at the committee level in the first meeting of the New Year, but delayed giving a final decision until last week.

Their approval also endorses a plan to debt finance the building. The plan, devised by Town Treasurer Dan Elliott will use a combination of land sales, including the sale of the current works yard on Scanlon Court and industrial lands on Leslie Street, and development charges which will be leveraged through some internal financing.

The project was approved 5 ? 4, with Councillors Chris Ballard, Evelyn Buck, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo voting against. When the project came up for review at last week's meeting, the nays were the first to take the floor.

Speaking against the motion, Councillor John Gallo was first out of the gate to criticize what he described as the ?exploding? budget, which ballooned from approximately \$14 million at the start to what is now in the neighbourhood of just under \$26 million.

?I am not confident I fully understand how we got from \$15 million to \$26 million and I have read every single report,? said Councillor Gallo, questioning the use of Development Charges, the amount of money paid by developers to build in Aurora.

A review of Aurora's Development Charges Bylaw is still in the works and Councillor Gallo questioned whether the ?development community? would support \$12 million in development charges for this project. Whichever way it came down, these costs would ultimately be borne by the tax-payer, he argued, as development charges are paid for by new property owners to developers.

?You can be sure that if we increase development charges to new homes, the developers are not going to absorb those costs,? said Councillor Gallo. ?The concept of taxpayers not paying into this is ridiculous to me. I believe we need to press the reset button and have a much better understanding about how these costs [are] to the tune of \$10 million over the original budget. At the end of the day, perhaps that is exactly what it will cost to build this structure.?

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, part of her ?no? vote came down to the location of the site. Although she has been a strong advocate for using the former Aurora Hydro building, now home to the Lt. Gov. John Graves Simcoe Armory, as home for the Parks Department, she said the topographically-challenged sloping land purchased for the new Joint Ops Centre (JOC) and making it

suitable for the purpose has inflated the costs.

‘I am not satisfied that the site chosen is the right place for a public works yard for this joint facility,’ she said. ‘[The Plan] has a beautiful picture showing a beautiful architect-designed building sitting on a nice, level walk. That is not the reality. The reality is something quite different and I have serious concerns about what we have there [but] I do not argue against the need for a new facility.’

Councillor Chris Ballard also said he was in favour of a new facility, particularly one like this that will be built to high environmental standards, but the price tag is simply too high.

‘At no time did we say we had to cap this at \$18 million,’ he said. ‘We have never capped this and said we have \$18 million to spend ? can we get enough of a Centre to move us out of this decrepit facility and get us a new start? That is what I have been looking for and I think [this] is a very expensive long-term solution.’

Added Councillor Gaertner: ‘We need a new Operations Centre, but we do not need it at this financial cost. I think [the cost] is too great for our taxpayers. The fact is we’re using taxpayers’ money and it insults me to say that we are not.’

Voting in favour of the project, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Councillors John Abel, Sandra Humfryes, Paul Pirri and Michael Thompson expressed a degree of frustration that the Councillors voting against the plan were highlighting what they believe to be problems with the plan but offering up no ‘real solutions.’

‘It is unfortunate that no one who thinks we should approach it differently does not come up with solutions,’ said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. ‘That is the unfortunate part. We have heard time and again that this is a good idea [but] if it is a good idea, how about bringing forward some of those concerns if it will address the ‘but’. We have decided that this is not good, but no one is coming up with what is good.’

‘This is something we need in order to provide the services that our residents have come to expect as we go forward. I think we have expressed enough concern to [Infrastructure Director Ilmar] Simanovskis that he is going to be watching the pennies carefully. We need to respect wherever the costs come from, how we spend those dollars, and I believe we will be doing exactly that as we move forward with this project.’

Others, such as Councillor John Abel, said it is understandable how some Councillors ‘don’t have a good grasp’ of the financials as the four left the January meeting before they discussed the Debt Financing plan.

‘We’re moving in a responsible way and we’re planning for the future of our growth,’ said Councillor Abel. ‘I don’t think it is fair that if you leave the meeting, [you] then come back and call it spin. I think it is misleading and it is borne out in report after report. It has been a precedent before in this town for major facilities and we have to address the future of our municipality and part of that is providing service and operational costs.’

Councillor Thompson expressed a similar view.

‘We haven’t been able to find a way forward. It has not really been a collaborative process and there are comments flying left, right and centre that this is unfortunate because everybody agrees we need it and it is in the best interests of the Town. Yet, perhaps because it is an election year, it’s political, who knows, but it is so difficult to work towards a common goal. The need has been obvious and then we get comments about no financial plan, no grasp. It is just unfortunate we can’t find a way to collaborate or work forward to address some of these issues which, for some, there is no interest in working.’

Added Councillor Humfryes: ‘I haven’t heard any better ideas. I hear it is too much money [but] no great ideas of [how] to do this.’