

Aurora will see benefits of Armoury lease, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

Aurora will see many offshoot investments following a \$4 million investment in the historic Aurora Armoury, according to Councillors.

This was the response of the majority of local lawmakers at the last Council meeting of 2017 as Councillor John Abel renewed his criticism over the Town's lease deal with the Canadian Food & Wine Institute of Niagara College.

In a deal negotiated behind closed doors and executed in November, Niagara College and the Town of Aurora have entered a five year lease which will see the Institute bring training courses, as well as classes in brewing and viticulture to Aurora.

To seal the deal, however, \$4 million will need to be invested into the 1870s building to not only bring the former home of the Queen's York Rangers up to modern standards, but tack on a new addition that will both house a training kitchen and open the facility up to the rest of Town Park.

This \$4 million, however, has been a sticking point for Councillor Abel as the source of the funds has not yet been confirmed by Council. A further sticking point is his contention that the Armoury building would be put to better use as a home for local community groups and municipal programming.

'I can't approve an expenditure of this nature without knowing where the funding is coming from,' said Councillor Abel. 'I might be the only one who is not in support of this, but my responsibility is [to] the taxpayers of this Town and prudent use of our funding.'

He was indeed the only Council member to vote against the lease at the last Council meeting, with all but Councillor Jeff Thom present to weigh in on the matter.

In their comments, most Council members, including Mayor Geoff Dawe, said the lease was a 'bold' but beneficial move that could spur significant revitalization in Aurora's Downtown Core.

'The likely scenario is this is a cost-neutral move when you factor in the lease we're going after,' said Councillor Paul Pirri, who has been hailed as a leading proponent of the Niagara College agreement. 'There have been a lot of situations where we have agreed to move forward with plans without identifying the exact source of revenue and Councillor Abel had no problem doing that before, so I don't understand why there is a problem now.'

In his response, Councillor Michael Thompson said he took confidence in the five year lease deal as it indicates Niagara College does not see this expansion of the Institute as a short-term investment.

'They are doing so in the hope of being successful and having a long-term relationship and building that business within the community,' said Councillor Thompson. 'They see this as a long-term venture. Yes, there is some risk associated with it and there are some uncertainties, but they perceive themselves as being in Aurora for the long-term.'

'I think you have to look beyond the five year period and take into account: what is the potential for that long-term investment? I think if you are looking at it from a long-term perspective, I think from a financial perspective there will be substantial payback from Niagara College if the terms of the lease are extended and that is part of the decision making we as a Council looked at. We look at making sure Aurora is taken care of today, but we also look at 25 years from now and this is part of investing in the future.'

Councillor Tom Mrakas was of a similar viewpoint, stating that there would be a significant 'economic benefit' with 'spin offs' all around Aurora, but particularly in the Downtown Core, just 'one piece' of an overall vision for a revitalized Cultural Precinct.

'This is the beginning of the revitalization of the Downtown Core,' said Councillor Mrakas of both this agreement and the decision to move forward with the development of Library Square. 'This is what we have promised our residents, this is what we have all campaigned on in 2014 and this is what we're moving forward with. We're doing what the residents have asked us to do. I am excited, I think this Council is excited as a whole, and I think the residents are excited from feedback. This is something we're not only doing [for] now but in the future.'

This 'excitement' was expressed by Councillor Sandra Humfries as well, looking to the innovations the Town of Newmarket has put in place, such as Riverwalk Commons, to revitalize their own historic core.

'I am getting tired of all the accolades they are receiving while we do nothing,' she said. 'If this is called 'nothing' I would be shocked. Just getting [the Armoury] renovated is exquisite, in my opinion to get that historical building up to standards. There is no end to what can be done with the building now, for our residents and our businesses to truly take advantage of and enjoy.'

Added Mayor Dawe: 'When we purchased the Armoury in 2014, we knew we would have [do something and spend money] to bring it up to snuff. Both [the refurbishment and lease] are good things for our Town.'