

Bridge could provide important link at Library Square



By Brock Weir

A \$3.5 million bridge connecting the Aurora Public Library to the planned addition to the Church Street School could be one of the finishing touches on the Town's vision for Library Square.

Set to be ratified this week, Council met at the committee level last Tuesday night where they approved in principle a link between the two buildings, raising the total cost of the Library Square project by \$3.544 million.

The tentative addition to the Library Square vision came along with a further \$398,900 for a new entrance vestibule for the Library (APL) and a further \$157,000 for a café space to serve the Library Square area.

The Library Square link, which, if completed, will connect both buildings at their second floors, received an enthusiastic endorsement before the discussion began by APL CEO Bruce Gorman, who said a bridge would bring many benefits to the overall plan.

‘This completes Library Square, from my perspective,’ said Mr. Gorman. ‘It makes it full, it makes it wholesome, it makes this a place where people can meander back and have a whole lot of experiences within the same structure. To me, this is what we need to do to complete Library Square, to maximize what it can be.’

Mr. Gorman, who came to APL after long tenures in Halifax and Woodstock, said he has been involved in several construction projects over the years and one of his biggest regrets is not ‘seizing the moment’ and getting it right the first time, rather than making changes to construction after the fact at greater cost.

‘I think now is an opportunity to seize this moment and move forward with this link,’ he said, before outlining a laundry list of

benefits he saw the bridge bringing to Library Square. ?For [APL], obviously increased traffic flow with more people coming into that general area is good

[because]

having more people in the Library is great for us and the community as well. It is more of a ?unified' destination, a place where the community can come together to do a lot of things and maybe there are multiple things; maybe they are taking in a movie at the Library and taking in a great event somewhere else in the Square. I think that is powerful.?

Further, the bridge could offer an increase in programmable spaces and improve the Library's current parking situation by providing library patrons parking in the new parking lot at Library Square's northwest corner with a sheltered, all-weather connection to the building across the plaza.

To sweeten the deal, Mr. Gorman told Council that the APL board has approved a \$1.971 million contribution to the project through their Development Charges Reserved Fund, such is the importance in which they hold the bridge.

?There are a lot of reason why it is important for Library Square to be successful,? he said. ?It is a legacy; one of the legacies this Council will be able to leave behind and we want to make sure you know the Aurora Public Library is invested in this in many ways, including financially, too.?

Three options for the Library Square connection were presented to Council by architects Thomas Nemeskeri and Aaron Hendershott of RAW Design. The first option was an underground tunnel, the second was a straight connection bridge, with the third being very similar to Option 2, but with stairs connecting the bridge directly to the Library Square plaza.

While the tunnel was the cheapest option, clocking in at \$2.83 million, there were several drawbacks including it being in a more secluded area and that it presented a few infrastructure issues from soil displacement to rejigging the foundation plans for the Church Street School extension.

The third option ultimately won the day.

?We're imagining the bridge really frames the square by working with some of the existing topography and landscape design by creating a sort of boomerang shape that actually frames the square but also provides a bit of an entry at the north as well,? said Mr. Hendershott. ?What we want to do here is maintain a really open ground plan so that people can go to and from the plaza as well as provide something of a covered passageway at the plaza

level and links down to the café and the upper level of the Library.?

While Council members showed support of the overall vision ? with Councillor Sandra Humfryes calling it a key in building a ?very cohesive? Library Square ? some questioned the growing price tag attached to Library Square and how it will be ultimately paid for.

Councillor John Gallo, for instance, called for a public memo explaining in greater detail how the project will be funded. Previous funding models have outlined a financing plan over \$14 million coming in Federal grants, along with a draw from reserves and a contribution from the Town's Hydro funds, a reserve account created from profits garnered from the sale of Aurora Hydro.

If that grant application is unsuccessful, said Councillor Gallo, it could result in a \$22 million hit on the Hydro pot.

?I want this nailed down and I want to feel confident we know where the money is coming from to pay for this project,? said Councillor Gallo. ?I sit here pretty deep into this and I don't have a high level of confidence of where and how we're going to pay for this project and I need to be convinced if I am going to be supporting it.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner echoed this view.

As discussion continued, Councillor Michael Thompson that staff have presented a funding strategy that draws from reserves, but Council can choose an ?alternative? strategy at any time.

This was not enough for Councillor John Gallo who said, ?this is taxpayer money and we should figure out what the solid plan on how to pay for it [is], not just when we know what the final cost is.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas, however, said it was time to make a decision.

?If you're not comfortable, if you don't believe this is the right project to spend the Hydro Reserve funds on, well, vote against it,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?If you believe it is the right project, at the end of the day, we will use those Hydro reserves. We were told there was enough in there to move forward with this project. If you think this is the right project for the Town at the right time, then it should be a 'yes' because we have the funds. The Hydro Funds were to provide for a community asset; we sold a community asset and we should be providing for a community asset back. That's what we're doing here with this project.?