

College's withdrawal from Armoury leaves opportunities, questions

Niagara College's decision to pull its presence from the historic Armoury facility at Town Park as well as the new café in Aurora Town Square is an opportunity to "take a good look at the return on investment" on its deal with the Town, according to Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese.

The Town announced a "transition of operations" at The Armoury and Armoury Café on Thursday, January 16, taking many "including Weese, the area's Ward Councillor" by surprise.

In the statement, the Town said Niagara College's "five-year partnership with the Town" is coming to a close "with Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute (CFWI) wrapping operations at the Armoury at the end of January, with the Armoury Café at Aurora Town Square continuing until June 2025.

Both the Town and Niagara College stressed that event bookings made before the January 16 announcement would be honoured.

"Since signing their lease with the Town in 2019, as the first tenant of our world class multi-purpose event space, Niagara College has been a valued partner, bringing their expertise and dedication to operating The Armoury and more recently to The Armoury Café," said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a statement. "Together, we created dynamic spaces that offered residents and visitors exceptional dining experiences while showcasing innovative culinary education. We wish Niagara College further success as they pursue their new strategic priorities."

Added Marc Nantel, Niagara College's Vice President of Research, Innovation and Strategic Enterprises: "This five-year partnership has been a great opportunity for Niagara College, and we're grateful for the platform it has provided to showcase our expertise in culinary, beverage and hospitality. We thank the Town and everyone who has supported this endeavor, from the Aurora community and beyond."

In a further statement to The Auroran, Mayor Mrakas said Niagara College "cited new strategic priorities" for not renewing the lease and stressed the positive when looking ahead.

"While our partnership was mutually beneficial, this is an exciting opportunity for the Town to explore new partnerships that will build on the financial success and strong foundation already established," he said.

Asked to expand on the economic benefits the deal brought to Aurora over the last five years given the Town's significant investment in transforming the Armoury from a Victorian military facility used by the Queen's York Rangers regiment to the showplace it is today, Mayor Mrakas said the Town is "proud to have redeveloped the Armoury and create a café space" at Town Square.

"While the College will no longer be a tenant, we are excited at the potential both spaces have and look forward to engaging new community partners. This is an exciting time for our community. We have the opportunity to explore new partnerships that will build on the financial success and strong foundation established through our partnership with Niagara College ensuring these valuable spaces continue to reflect Aurora's spirit of innovation, collaboration and community pride.

"Town staff are exploring a range of opportunities for the future use of The Armoury and Town Square Café including potential partnerships, programming and tenancy options. Currently there is not a formal tender process underway, but updates will be shared as plans are finalized and timelines established."

While Councillor Weese shared in the enthusiasm for new opportunities for the space, he also said it was an opportunity to get further details on the investments made in bringing the Armoury to fruition as well as the benefits the Niagara College deal brought to the community.

?I was surprised at the announcement as I wasn't aware of any discussions around what Niagara College was planning on doing,? said Councillor Weese. ?My assumption was that it would be business as usual, but that turned out not to be the case. I don't know what the rationale [was] for Niagara to pull out, but I can only assume that it would be because the purpose of the facility and their use of the facility didn't work for them. That doesn't mean it wouldn't work for others. I believe it is an asset and an asset that can and will be realized in the future.

?It certainly is a time for us to take a good look at the investment and the return on that investment over the last five years. I realize that the economic climate has been challenging because of the pandemic and coming out of the pandemic, and that should certainly be considered when evaluating the success or failure of any venture that has spanned time. I believe this is a perfect opportunity to take a good review of both the services that were offered and promised, as well as a review of the finances, and to look to the future for opportunities that would enhance the area as a community space, but would be a financial success.

?Regardless of the outcome of the review, I think there's tremendous opportunity for this facility to grow in a number of directions and I am looking forward to hearing about the opportunities that may exist. This facility is located in the heart of the community and Town Park, which is another important area of our Town that attracts visitors and I think it has a great opportunity because the size and the location to be a tremendous space.?

When the partnership between the Town and Niagara College began in the fall of 2019, after being announced in 2017, Mayor Mrakas hailed the Armoury as ?the cornerstone of our downtown revitalization? and said the partnership will ?make our dream of creating a vibrant community hub a reality.?

The Armoury, in turn, promised it would ?provide many aspects of food and beverage education in the form of professional development opportunities, corporate training, team-building, and a variety of classes for the general public [giving] Aurora, and the surrounding region, a chance to gain a depth of knowledge in everything from winetasting to hands-on cooking classes with our professional staff.?

According to the Town, upon the departure of Niagara College, the municipality will retain ownership of the large appliances and built-in equipment installed in the Armoury, including its teaching kitchen, while small appliances and ?culinary hardware? will remain property of Niagara College.

By Brock Weir