

Community groups could face ouster for internal Library expansion

By Brock Weir

Community groups such as the Pine Tree Potters Guild could find themselves looking for a new home, if recommendations before Council on how to expand services at the Aurora Public Library are carried out.

A facilities needs study carried out by the Aurora Public Library Board and the Town of Aurora has nixed the possibility of expanding library services to a second location once eyed for Aurora's northeast, in favour of an expansion inside its current walls by reconfiguring existing space and taking over rooms and facilities used by other bodies.

These spaces include two public meeting rooms – the Magna Room and the Lebovic Room – as well as a large portion of the basement space currently occupied by the local ceramics guild, the Pine Tree Potters.

“Built in 2001, the Library Sector is really starting to approach a lifetime and there is a need to re-look at that facility,” said Stephen Langois, a consultant retained to carry out the study. “It does have some limitations [including] a lack of dedicated library program rooms and a computer lab, which compromises the Library's ability to offer in-demand programs, most notably programs for teens.”

Over the last several months, the consultants carried out extensive survey work throughout the community as well as hosting information sessions for Library stakeholders and the public alike.

They were encouraged by the fact 52 per cent of residents have used the library over the past 12 months – a high percentage for a community of this size, as well as the fact those respondents spoke positively about the location, customer service, and collections at the facility.

But, if there is no desire to expand to a second base or a satellite location, more space needs to be made within its walls to provide for the needs of a growing community.

“Residents did place a priority on improvements to existing facilities over a new location,” said Mr. Langois. “We are a growing community and you have a small shortfall at present. The shortfall is going to be around 4,000 square feet.”

When asked by Councillor Harold Kim of the long-term ramifications if Council did not heed the recommendations in the report, Mr. Langois said communities that have done nothing “are those who have neglected their library system and I think it reflects poorly on the leadership of Councils of those communities.”

“It means their residents have insufficient access to the services the Library offers and those are many,” he said. “They go well beyond recreational reading and touch on support for schools' curriculum. More importantly, as we're seeing time and again, the social aspect of the library is a third place. It is not home, it is not work, it is a place where the community can gather, not unlike a community centre. There is a different feel and atmosphere to those places, but they are certainly a valuable contributor to the local population. There is an economic benefit to local libraries as well.”

With a voice in favour of the recommendations from Aurora Public Library CEO Jill Foster, the decision is now in Council's hands. At first blush at the last sitting of Council last week before the summer recess, however, the response was largely positive, but Council has requested further details on just what impacts these recommendations would have on the Town as a whole.

“What I am really encouraged about is our Library, for the short term, is actually quite suitable with some changes internally,” said Councillor Sandra Humfries. “Hopefully we can work all those things out and have a space that is even more accommodating to our residents. I am incredibly proud of our library and it is just great to see that the planning done years ago is able to hold up with the growth of our community.”

Councillor Paul Pirri also offered his support, suggesting the report be sent to staff for a further report on the cost implications of turning these spaces, which often generate income for the Town, over to the Library.

?There was a pretty big request made of Council here tonight,? he said. ?I support the request, but I don't think I have enough information as a Councillor to make a decision on the request. I would also like to know where the Potters Guild is expected to go and the impact of that. There are a lot of outstanding questions, but I think we need to move forward in this direction.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson: ?I look forward to getting a report back from staff on the impact and costs associated with it. If the Library is going to continue providing the service it does to our community, certainly we need to recognize there is a growing demand on it and we need more space.?