

Conservation and new museum top priorities with \$100k investment



(Above: Lindsay Bontoft of the AHS with local historian Jacqueline Stuart, Thursday, ahead of Ms. Stuart's lecture on the history of the Aurora Collection and historical archives. Auroran photo by David Falconer)

By Brock Weir

Items in the historic Aurora Collection won a \$100,000 reprieve last week as Council vote to invest \$100,000 to look at ways to conserve and manage the artefacts and further ways to develop a museum.

The decision came after weeks of ongoing debate on just what Council should do with the collection of heritage artefacts that had been collected by ? and donated to ? the Aurora Historical Society (AHS).

The AHS and the Town entered into discussions last year to transfer ownership of the thousands of artefacts to the Town. This entailed an extensive review of just what was in the collections and appraisals by the consultants Cultural Asset Management.

While the consultants had praise for the extent of the collection and largely for the current storage conditions at the Aurora Cultural Centre, they also raised some alarm bells, including the condition of the textile collection which is harbouring an infestation of carpet beetles.

For some Councillors, particularly Councillors Sandra Humfryes and John Abel, who both sit on Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee, it was important to spend a recommended \$179,000 towards transferring and managing the collection this year. Hampering going forward with the plan, however, was the majority of Council who agreed it would be best to hold off until the completion of a Cultural Master Plan to examine all of Aurora's Heritage and Cultural elements ? and how they work together ? which is due by the end of the year or early 2014.

Taking another crack at the issue last Tuesday, Councillors voted to execute a transfer agreement with the AHS and, in a 7 ? 2 decision, approved \$100,000 to be spent from the tax rate stabilization account to fund a report on ?museum management, exhibition development, collections management, and a conservation program.?

?I am glad to see us moving forward as far as we have,? said Councillor Evelyn Buck. ?I am not a great fan of consultant studies and I never miss an opportunity to say so, but I think this was one of the best studies I have ever seen and the most practical benefit from that work that was done. It has taken us all this time to get to this point and I beg of you do not let us drag this out another month. There is no reason why we shouldn't continue the momentum. It has been a pretty slow progress.?

The vision of giving the collection a little bit of a financial vote of confidence was supported by Councillor Abel who said he believed it was essential to take 'baby steps' towards a full funding model and as far as baby steps go, putting forward a \$100,000 commitment this year, would take things to the 2014 budget process and thus, perhaps, a more stable funding model.

More tentative in his support, however, was Councillor Michael Thompson who said it was important not to lose sight of the key reason on why things had progressed as far as it has so far, and that was the vision to re-establish a permanent museum.

'For my own satisfaction, I would have liked to have seen a few more alternatives, even just supporting the AHS to a greater degree and having them manage the museum,' he said. 'They do have the expertise and they don't have the resources to be able to do it. We have spent so much time looking on whether or not we should take ownership of the collection, we may have lost the overarching principle which was the re-establishment of a museum.'

'I don't see the final vision of it, but I do think it is essential that if we do not move forward with this, that we step up to the plate and move the funds forward for the preservation of the collection?whether we own it, or it stays with the AHS, we need to re-establish the museum and there has to be an interim solution.'

For Councillors Chris Ballard and Wendy Gaertner, an interim solution should not progress without a clear vision of what it is to accomplish. Councillor Ballard told Councillors he believed if Aurora was 'in for a penny' it was 'in for a pound' without that vision.

'We should plan first and implement second,' said Councillor Ballard. 'We have the Cultural Master Plan study under way, we have asked that the process be truncated, so it would be before the New Year with an eye to make sure we knew where the collection would fit into the greater scheme of things in Aurora.'

'I still want to wait for that before we make a decision to invest almost a quarter of a million into this collection.'

Added Councillor Gaertner: 'I can't agree with taking over the collection and managing it unless we have some sort of plan in place and it is going to involve money. I do not feel comfortable with taking on the collection and not being able to know how I am going to care for that.'

Speaking in favour of the motion, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe suggested that rather than the funding methods suggested to move this forward, a better solution might be found in taking a portion of Aurora's \$30 million hydro reserve account and setting up an endowment fund to spend on heritage.

'We're protecting our heritage and I think we're all prepared to set up to it in different ways,' he said. 'Why don't we look at it as a good use of hydro money? I have an issue stepping up to a long-term support, but I have no problem stepping up to say we need to do this.'

Come 2014, The Town of Aurora will assume control of the Aurora Room, the second floor exhibition space at the Aurora Cultural Centre, one of the new clauses in their 2013 agreement. This space will be for the exclusive use of the Aurora Collection.