

Council moves ahead with Victoria Hall renovations



Council has approved a budget increase to renovate historic Victoria Hall on a vote of 4 ? 3.

The future use of Aurora's historic Victoria Hall was made clearer this week after a proposal to renovate the building at a cost far beyond its original estimate was presented to Council at the Committee level.

At issue was a significant budget increase in the estimated cost to overhaul the building for future use. Originally budgeted at \$500,000, the proposed costs now stand at \$2.182 million after further studies on the 1870s building found the need for new flooring due to dry rot, and the replacement of an existing addition to the Hall's south end to make it fully accessible.

No firm decision on a path forward was made at the February Committee of the Whole meeting, with Council voting to simply receive the report for information, but further discussion led to the funding approval on Tuesday evening.

First to speak out against the rising price tag at the Committee level was Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo who questioned why these updated figures were coming to Council months after local lawmakers approved this year's municipal budget.

?Council's role is financial stewardship. When we are being asked to more than quadruple a project budget, we must be provided with sufficient clarity and certainty to exercise that duty responsibly,? he said. ?What is now before us reflects a materially expanded scope, including demolition of the south addition, replacement of flooring systems with a slab-on-grade construction, significant structural remediation, major electrical and mechanical replacement, expanded consultant contracts? if structural deficiencies such as dry rot and load failures were present, why were they not fully identified during the earlier feasibility work??

Outstanding questions, he said, included how the building would be operated, generate revenue for the Town, ongoing maintenance, and return on investment. He also cautioned against the funding model of dipping into municipal reserves in the face of uncertainty related to Development Charges.

Similar concerns were raised by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese who questioned how estimates could be off by more than 300 per cent. Staff contended the rising costs were related to a deeper analysis of the building from original studies which looked primarily at ?general improvements.? Work to bring it up to code would be ?a lot more intensive,? they said.

Nevertheless, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said while she believes it's important to maintain heritage buildings like Victoria Hall, residents she's heard from have expressed some sticker shock. This was a sentiment echoed by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim who said while initial studies were intended to show how Victoria Hall could be made safe for ?just basic activities,? there has to be some leniency when it comes to old buildings that might have hidden issues.

'I agree with everyone that it's certainly sticker shock,' he said. 'Based on the discussions we're having right now, it seems that the budget has to be tied to the use [of Victoria Hall in the future] and because we don't know that yet, I'm in favour of just having this report for receipt only until we get more information.'

'Conflicted' was one word used by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland to summarize her view on the proposal. Victoria Hall matters, she says, and is a 'historic piece of our history' in the downtown core, and it's worth investing in 'properly.'

'What this report makes clear is essentially staff has gone beyond the surface level and you've definitely discovered what the building actually needs in order to have those changes made,' she said. 'I don't think this is something that we can [do] kind of helter-skelter. This is something we need to do properly once structural issues, accessibility requirements, as we've talked about, the modern building code standards, that's changed quite a bit. It doesn't leave much room for shortcuts anywhere in these times. I accept that, and unfortunately when it comes to historic buildings, older structures reveal the truth. Sometimes that truth isn't always what we want to hear, and unfortunately that's what costs money' and the longer you wait, the more and more it is going to cost.

'I've heard some Council and maybe some members of the public saying 'let's do what we kind of need to do' so you can put lipstick on a pig all day long but then you're just going to keep doing the same thing over and over again and I just feel like we've got to do this right.'

More fulsome support came from Mayor Tom Mrakas who said it came down to three options: 'renovate it, sell it, or demolish it,' but stressed a decision had to be made.

'If we believe in protecting our heritage, renovation is the only responsible option,' he said. 'It's funded from our reserves that exist to invest in the infrastructure and capital assets. It does not impact the tax rate; this is about investing in our community, period.'

'Doing nothing is a neutral choice,' he continued. 'Delaying the work is effectively demolition by decay. That is what we accuse developers and builders of doing when they come into our community and allow buildings to rot, yet we're suggesting we should wait? Allowing a heritage building to deteriorate to the point where demolition becomes inevitable, this is what happens when leadership looks the other way. I will not allow that to happen to one of Aurora's heritage assets. If people think the cost is high today, absolutely there is sticker shock, but they should ask themselves what it will cost one or two years from now? Construction costs are not going to go down; waiting only makes this more expensive and risks losing the building entirely.'

By Brock Weir
Editorial Local Journalism Initiative Reporter