

Council, public divided on future use of Victoria Hall

The future of Victoria Hall could go commercial after Council considered the next chapter for the downtown Aurora landmark last week.

Council voted in favour of a decision coming out of a Closed Session meeting on May 12 where the topic of discussion was a lease agreement.

Approval came on a vote of 4 ? 3, with Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillors Rachel Gilliland, Michael Thompson, and Harold Kim voting for it to move forward, while Councillors Ron Weese, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo voted against.

Although Council members were limited in what they could say on the lease on the building, located on the southwest corner of Mosley and Victoria Streets, as it was discussed in camera, members who opposed the agreement said they believed it was not in the community's best interest.

?I'm not in favour of proceeding with what's being recommended,? said Ward 5's Councillor Gallo. ?There's only so much I can say, but I believe that we're making a mistake and there are things yet to be decided. I don't agree with the direction that is being proposed.?

Added Councillor Gaertner: ?I'm not in favour of this, either. I don't believe it's in residents' best interests.?

Mayor Mrakas, on the other hand, offered a different viewpoint.

?I'll say I do believe this is in the best interest of the Town, the residents, and it's part of revitalizing our downtown,? he said. ?I think residents in this community [will be] very, very excited once they find out the details, which will hopefully be coming out as soon as possible.?

While the lease agreement is still under wraps, last week's meeting was also an opportunity for Council to speak on a number of documents related to the controversial renovation plan for Victoria Hall that were previously subject to Closed Session confidentiality.

While some members welcomed the release of the documents, others said disclosures did not go far enough ? particularly as they relate to the future tenancy and use of the building.

One document missing from the disclosure, said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, related to the scope of work that will be carried out on the building, which he said was important ?because it identifies the intent of the use of the facility,? including a note that part of the intent is to create a space ?to generate an economically sustainable model for the operators.?

?I guess the assumption here is that this is going to be a commercial use, as opposed to just the refurbishment, so the purpose of the document was to uncover some of these things? and it would have been good to have this information well in advance,? said Councillor Weese, referencing concerns offered by residents at the podium earlier in the meeting.

?The respondents [to an RFP] were asked to prepare a comprehensive business model to the scope of work for improving and leasing the Hall, which implies commercial use once again, not community use.?

Responding to Councillor Weese was Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny who said the RFP was not ?specifically geared to necessarily commercial use,? but it was an option on the table.

The RFP called for pitches on the use of the historic Aurora Armoury, previously home to a campus of Niagara College's Canadian

Food and Wine Institute, the café space at Aurora Town Hall, which was also operated by Niagara College, and Victoria Hall.

Since Slabtown Cider Company took over the Armoury last year, and Newmarket's My Indie Coffee the Aurora Town Square café space, Victoria Hall was the last piece of the puzzle.

Nadorozny noted the 'significance' of the Victoria Hall building to the community was considered in the process, which was 'consistent with the aims of the Town in terms of developing these properties [into] spaces that could be leveraged by the community.'

Also raising questions on the disclosure was Councillor Gallo, who questioned why documents related to the Class D cost estimate to renovate Victoria Hall also remain under wraps.

Staff said 23 documents related to Victoria Hall were examined for disclosure and this was one of four 'flagged for further review.' The reason, they said, is these documents involve third-party financial information and were subject to ongoing negotiation on potential procurement.

'This information was shared with Council during the initial debate by me and at the time we had checked with the consultant, they were fine with it, they wanted to have some things clarified, but, in essence, they were fine with it,' said Nadorozny. 'I believe I used wording to the effect of, 'We would prefer this information remained private' because of this procurement that we have not completed.

'It's just a timing thing. We're happy to issue that full report eventually, but, as a normal course of business, we wouldn't put our preliminary estimates and so on in anticipation of ultimately going to the market to get a quote.'

Councillor Gallo nevertheless said the decision to keep this confidential was 'disappointing' to the public.

'I think they have every right to see this,' he contended. 'There's a lot of value to that document, to the public, to have full transparency on how we make decisions and it's disappointing to see that. You have a consultant, the author, saying okay, we have this Council, I believe, saying okay, there's no link to the third party [and] we can't release it to the public. That's not transparency. That is not the way we should be conducting businesses on a \$2.1 million project. It's disappointing to see, but it is what it is. Control is clearly out of our hands. Other people, staff, make the final decision.'

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