

## Councillor calls for 'full accounting' of Armoury renovations as Niagara College prepares exit

A Councillor is calling for a 'full accounting' of all public funds spent on the renovation of the Aurora Armoury as its current tenant, Niagara College's Canadian Food and Wine Institute (CFWI) prepares to vacate at the end of next month.

The motion was approved at the Committee level last week after being brought forward by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

Given the decision of Niagara College to pull out of The Armoury, as well as its deal to operate the Café at Aurora Town Square at the end of June, the Councillor said it's important for the public to get a full scope of the financials.

'This is somewhat of an homage to Councillor (John) Abel who attempted to do this very thing back when we first discussed this and, unfortunately, was not able to accomplish this,' said Councillor Gallo, referring to Aurora's late Deputy Mayor who served from 2010 to 2018. 'I hope we can accomplish this now.'

In his motion, Councillor Gallo said 'transparency and accountability in financial matters are essential to ensuring public trust and responsible stewardship of Town assets.'

'The Armoury building and its lease to Niagara College represents a significant investment and partnership by the Town of Aurora,' he said in the motion. 'It's prudent to undertake a full financial review of this arrangement prior to the conclusion of Niagara College's lease on June 30, 2025.'

Should the motion get final ratification at Council on May 27, staff will be tasked to prepare a 'comprehensive report' covering the full acquisition cost of the Armoury building from the Department of National Defence in 2014; the cost of reconstruction and renovations to the Armoury, including a breakdown separating the leasehold improvements directly related to the operations of Niagara College; total rental income received from Niagara College; any further obligations, commitments, or contributions made by the Town of Aurora under the lease agreement; [and] any other financial analysis staff deems necessary to provide full transparency related to the project and lease.'

The motion cleared Committee with little discussion, moving it forward to the next Council meeting.

**AURORA TOWN SQUARE COSTS**The May 27 session is also expected to take a closer look at financials related to the costs of purchasing Yonge Street properties near Aurora Town Square, particularly the two parcels immediately north of the Aurora Public Library which currently house professional offices, salons, and more.

Following a further motion from Councillor Gallo last month, staff were tasked with releasing Closed Session reports presented to Council behind closed doors related to the purchases of 15157 Yonge Street, 15165 Yonge Street, and 15171 Yonge Street.

Some of the documents released, however, have been 'partially redacted' as they were provided to the Town on a confidential basis by a third party, or would disclose personal information, information that might compromise the safety or security of the properties or tenants, information confidential to the tenants of the properties, or information related to confidential dealings with the tenants of the properties,' said Town Solicitor Patricia De Sario in her report to Council.

While the matter was slated for discussion last week, it was delayed to the end of the month pending two attachments that were not included in the report.

What is on the table, however, suggests in purchasing the parcel of properties for approximately \$7.5 million, the Town may have paid more than market value.

An appraisal of the parcel completed in 2015 pegged the property at being worth between \$6.8 million and \$7.1 million. Another appraisal carried out four years later valued the property at \$5 million.

?This is based on existing leases, building age and expected condition, overall property size/area and location, and comparable sales,? reads one of the Closed Session reports. ?Previous discussions with the vendor suggest that they believe that the value of the property exceeds the value identified by the Town's appraisals. Staff do not believe that the vendor will accept a purchase price that is within the appraised value range.?

Indeed, the report notes ?the vendor asserts that the same individual [developing parcels on the west side of Yonge] had offered over \$8 million for the subject property.?

?All of the valuations do not consider onsite issues such as soil contamination, which have been identified in previous environmental analysis. The extent and implications of the contaminations are not fully known and could impact the value of the property.?

A subsequent report states that the lands, which were previously used for a repair garage and for Cousins Dairy, may have soil contaminants related to oil and gasoline products, as well as underground infrastructure still in place ? including holding tanks.

?Based on the test results to date, and in comparison to the adjacent library project where contaminants were found adjacent to 15157 Yonge Street, the cost of cleanup is estimated at approximately \$100,000. However, this estimated cost is based on limited testing to date and would not include any clean-up costs should the property contain any deleterious material or chemical compounds not identified to date,? the report reads, suggesting further testing be carried out on the less disturbed portions of the rear of the properties currently being used for parking.

**By Brock Weir**