

## Councillor raises concerns over process, transparency in Victoria Hall debate

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo has raised concerns regarding transparency and process in the discussions that led to Council's approval of a plan to renovate historic Victoria Hall.

The Councillor has sharply criticized the rising cost of the project, which, following Council approval last week, now stands at \$2.2 million, well beyond the \$500,000 previously budgeted.

While Councillor Gallo says the ballooning price tag raises "serious transparency and process concerns," those who voted for the project argued the previously-approved \$500,000 was merely a placeholder within the budget.

"This was not a transparent or responsible process," said Councillor Gallo in a statement following last week's Council meeting. "Council was asked to approve a multi-million dollar increase without having been provided critical structural reports when they were completed and without those costs being reflected in the capital budget when it was adopted."

The Councillor argued the engineering and structural findings were completed in May of 2025, but Council was not provided that update in real time.

"This means Council did not have access to material information affecting millions of dollars in public spending when it was first known," he said. "That undermines Council's ability to fulfil its fiduciary responsibility to taxpayers."

"My vote against this increase was not about opposing the preservation of Victoria Hall," he said. "It was about ensuring proper process, transparency, and financial accountability."

"When a project increases from \$500,000 to over \$2 million, Council and the public deserve clear answers, full disclosure, and adequate time to review the implications. Residents expect their elected officials to exercise careful oversight when significant public funds are involved. That requires timely disclosure, open discussion, and a process that ensures Council has the information needed to make informed decisions."

Councillor Gallo's statement reflects comments made during the February 24 Council meeting.

There, he said it was a question of "leadership" on Council, particularly ensuring each elected member "has all the necessary information and adequate time to review and discuss it."

"Given the clear gaps in disclosure, the timing of the structural findings, the existence of reports Council did not receive until recently and the financial magnitude of this decision, it is appropriate that this matter be referred to Closed Session so that Council can receive full and complete information, including specific details that cannot be discussed publicly, and ask the necessary questions required to fulfil our fiduciary responsibility to the residents of Aurora before any financial decision is made."

Supporting Councillor Gallo's concerns were Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese who said the decision made last week was "not about heritage or preservation of heritage" but rather about "process." Similarly, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said it was "alarming" how the recommendations came before Council.

"It's not the way I want to be responsible to the taxpayers, so I definitely think this needs to go into Closed Session and I'd like to know how this process happened or lack of process happened," she said.

Municipal CAO Doug Nadorozny told Council that the process was a "difficult one" to quickly summarize as the process has been ongoing since a "superficial" 2016 review. The estimate of \$500,000, he said, went back to that point.

“Since then, and this isn't by any means a comprehensive review of all the steps, but the major points that bring us to today, Council will recall we were given direction as staff to consider a possible alternate use for that building. It wasn't approved. It was suggested that we go back and do some more work with someone that had responded to the request for proposals,” said Nadorozny of where the process stands now.

“From that point on, we were trying to figure out what's the best way to get this packaged up and bring it back to Council for potentially an alternate use. As we contemplated that work, two things that we felt we were lacking information for a comprehensive review: one was really what lurked underneath that floor. The original consultant in 2016 did not do a survey of the conditions underneath. The floor seemed fine. There was nothing obvious from a visual perspective that the floor was about to give way or anything like that, so it wasn't part of their 2016 assessment. We also discovered that before we could go to a tender or to get any kind of detailed work, we also needed a designated substance review, which is a common part of a big project like that to see, especially for a building that old, is there lead, is there asbestos, is there other things that would complicate a renovation? That level of detail was never done 10 years ago. That was all done as part of potentially bringing back to Council an alternate use that we had shared with Council previously.”

The dry rot, he added, was brought up in May and staff had the consultant to “go back and do a more detailed review” of Victoria Hall.

“We identified those areas where we needed some more information, and they are the ones that determined the situation with the dry rot and also the structure of the floor itself, being a floor built on top of a floor. That resulted in there not being an easy fix to that,” said Nadorozny. “When we got into a complete reconstruction of the floors, tearing everything down to that level, we decided that it made sense to do a more holistic approach to give Council the full spectrum of what could be done with that site when if you're going to consider that kind of a restoration. It's on that basis that the revised quote was brought forward.”

Council was ultimately split 4 ? 3 on whether to forge ahead with the next steps in the renovations rather than pausing for further information.

Prior to the vote, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she believed all the relevant information she needed to make a decision was before Council. Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said he was “happy to support” Councillor Gallo's request for further discussion “about how we got there, how the reports came about, the lack of information, to have more transparency,” but said it was important to “move forward.”

“I think it's important that we move forward with this and continue on this path for the development of Town Square and supporting the renovation of the existing facility, the asset, Victoria Hall, so that we can move forward with some of the things that we've talked about in terms of future uses and “complementing what is available to the public downtown.”

Mayor Tom Mrakas, at the end of the debate, contended that “every single member at this table had the exact same information” and the same opportunities to pose their questions to staff.

“This is an investment in our community that we have been working towards: a goal of creating a vibrant downtown core, and it's another piece of that bigger puzzle of that revitalization,” he said, adding the previously budgeted \$500,000 was a placeholder figure. “I'll just remind everyone sitting at this table, we have a placeholder for an aquatic center. Does everyone at the table remember what that placeholder was? \$22 million. Does anyone at this table think that we would have built an aquatic center for \$22 million? It would probably be closer to \$100 million to build that facility. We need to create a budget, put it in as a placeholder, to allow staff to have the ability and the funds to move forward and bring us Class D estimates to start to do the initial work. Because without any funds whatsoever, they can't move forward. Without any direction from this table, they can't move forward on doing a detailed analysis.”

Since the meeting Councillor Gallo says he's been heartened by the feedback he's received from residents, and contended the vast majority of the information in front of Council in closed session should be made public.

?Most people, the vast majority, are disappointed on a bunch of levels ? the increase in budget, the fact that we're spending that much money on it, and the lack of transparency are probably the two biggest things,? he says.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter