

Decision on Aurora Collection could be delayed

By Brock Weir



AHS curator Catherine Richards exhibits a historical piece of medical equipment alongside its modern counterpart ahead of a new exhibition in conjunction with Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Councillors could delay making a firm decision on whether or not to acquire the historic Aurora Collection until the completion of a study to look at the larger picture.

That is the decision going into this week's Council meeting following a committee resolution to expressed interest in acquiring the collection comprising of much of the Town's historic artefacts from the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) until the completion of a Cultural Master Plan.

The Cultural Master Plan was approved earlier this year as part of Aurora's budget to undertake a study to look at the future direction of places like the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Public Library, and AHS in the greater context of the Town. Going into last week's meeting, Councillors faced a recommendation to execute a transfer agreement and an exhibition and management agreement with the AHS, allocate \$179,470 from Council's discretionary reserve account for the operating costs of the collection, and a further \$50,000 from the same account for capital costs.

Had they gone ahead with this recommendation last week, it would transfer operation of the collection from the AHS to the department of Park and Recreation.

The Town recently secured exhibition space for the collection in the "Aurora Room" at the Aurora Cultural Centre, but Councillors said last week they wanted a greater sense of how everything is going to fit together.

"I don't feel comfortable going back to the residents and the taxpayers at this point in time and asking for more funds this year to support this, especially without a plan in place," said Councillor Paul Pirri, noting he would, however, like to see some funding put in place for a Sesquicentennial exhibit later this year.

There was unanimous consent around the table that proceeding with the exhibition was important, but the majority agreed to put the brakes on the larger recommendation.

"I agree there is merit in trying to incorporate this into a Cultural Master Plan," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "There needs to be some discussion about all those pieces and looking at it from the big picture, that is what I see the Cultural Master Plan doing."

Councillors ultimately voted to express their "continued interest" in moving forward with the acquisition but fell short of the actual

follow through, despite their large support for the ultimate goal.

'I am very much in favour of the Town taking ownership of the collection,' said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. 'I think looking at the whole motion, it needs to be rolled into a complete discussion of what we want to do with everything. I think we're moving in the right direction, but if we move ahead with executing the agreement, we have to perhaps take \$50,000 to get something going in the Aurora Room to actually show that we're serious moving forward.'

'I am not prepared to step up with \$180,000 [now to acquire it]. That comes out of Council discretionary reserves, which has no effect [on the taxpayer] but what happens year after and year after? I think that is part of the whole issue in terms of the whole cost.'

Mayor Dawe's motion to express continued interest but simply allocate funds at this time for the Aurora 150 exhibit was seen as a 'good middle ground' for Councillor Chris Ballard. He said it showed support to the AHS, but also to the taxpayer as well in looking at the big picture on how to use the collection and when to use it.

'I was concerned we were moving ahead with this study without having a Cultural Master Plan and I think what I am hearing around the table is some concern from others about that as well,' he said. 'I know there would be great disappointment, perhaps, on the part of the Aurora Historical Society and staff have put a lot of time on this, but we have done a lot of really good work and we know where we stand in terms of what we're getting and where we want to take it.'

Others, however, weren't quite as convinced this was a step in the right direction, particularly Councillors John Abel and Sandra Humfries, two Councillors who sit on the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee.

'We have to bring our artefacts out and display them proudly,' said Councillor Humfries. 'I don't want to see this deferred.' For Councillor Abel, the motion passed at Committee was simply a delay tactic and he said he wasn't in favour of 'mothballing' the collection any longer.

'We want to get that collection out of storage and move it forward,' he said. 'We have to be ready for that. We have a great year to celebrate it and I think we really want to move towards that. I don't want to step back. We're so close to doing something really good for the collection and for the Town.'

Following the meeting, Catherine Richards, Curator of the AHS, said she was not surprised Councillors chose to defer at Committee but would be interested in seeing if that still stands after this week's Council.

'I think Council is taking care to make sure it does link to a big picture, which is healthy but am I concerned with the issues brought forward by the Cultural Asset Management Group around conservation are being delayed?' he said. 'We still have those issues that won't be addressed and [is] that good for the collection? No.'

'My concern is we are in a situation where there are definite conservation concerns which should be addressed in the immediate future, but they won't be.'