

Details of Library Square property deal will remain behind closed doors

Details surrounding the \$7.5 million purchase of Yonge Street buildings between Mosley Street and the Aurora Public Library as part of the overall vision of Library Square will remain behind closed doors ? at least for now.

Council last week voted against a motion put forward by Councillor John Gallo that would have seen all closed session reports on the purchase of 15157, 15165, and 15171 Yonge Street placed on the Town's website for all to see.

?I think it is definitely important, especially with these types of dollars, we let the public know the details of the purchase and the reports that were before us that helped make our decision,? said Councillor Gallo, speaking to his motion on September 29.

Councillor Gallo has been an open critic of the land purchase since it was announced this past summer and made it clear from the outset that he would push for the information presented in Closed Session be made public.

While he conceded there would need to be some redactions made to the report due to provisions set out in the Municipal Act, he said it would be worth the effort.

?I think this is a good thing and we'll be transparent and let the public know the details around a \$7.5 million purchase,? he said.

Councillor Gallo found support for his motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said as the deal is closed, now is the right time to make the information public.

?I don't want the public to say we're holding the information back for some reason,? she said. ?It is completely appropriate to do this now.?

But Council colleagues and Municipal staff had a different viewpoint.

?While I agree with the intent of the motion to provide transparency to the residents, I am concerned with the timing of doing [this] now,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?We are actively trying to market the property and work with developers on the future development of that corner. I think that in releasing all that information now there is a potential of putting the Town at a disadvantage. While I believe that transparency is important, you have to balance transparency with confidentiality and protecting the best interests of the Town.

?I am happy to release all the information at the appropriate time. I don't feel it is now while we're still actively trying to market the property.?

Patricia DeSario, Solicitor for the Town of Aurora, echoed this viewpoint that ?this might not be the right time to release this information.?

?There may be items in the reports that could potentially prejudice the Town and any strategies or negotiations it is looking for in the future,? she said. ?If it is something that Council does want to do? then certain parts of the report would have to be redacted.?

Agreeing that releasing the report now would be a ?disadvantage? to the Town were Councillors Harold Kim and Sandra Humfryes. Councillor Humfryes, for instance, said she was initially supportive of Councillor Gallo's motion and ?there is nothing to hide? but hearing that releasing the information could put the Town at a ?disadvantage? made her pause.

?I would hate damaging that opportunity [for the overall plan],? she said.

Mayor Tom Mrakas added he didn't see the urgency in releasing the reports at this particular moment in time.

?Do we need to provide transparency? Absolutely,? he said. ?We heard from our Solicitor that we still have a lot to do on this property. We do so many things where we designate properties historic, we bought this property and why do we do these things? We do them to put ourselves in a better position for the Town, for our residents, for us to be able to do something better for the Town. We put ourselves in a better dealing position [and] we lose that if we just put it out.

?It is not the right time. Will we put it out? Will the public know every single detail? Absolutely. If it wasn't being stopped by confidentiality, I would tell everybody exactly. I have no problem. I am all for transparency, but at this time I am not for us losing our upper hand when dealing and moving forward with the redevelopment of this property and ultimately the revitalization of our Downtown Core. If we want to hurt the revitalization of our Downtown Core, then let's go ahead and do that. I am not for that. [We are here] to make sure the Town's best interests are upheld.?

But Councillor Gallo was firm in his frustration with the process.

?I just get a sense that clearly I am out of the loop because I am not aware of negotiation, any of that. We spent \$7.5+ million of the Town's money and they know zero about the details around that. If I am cherry picking, maybe, but I have no problem whatsoever in releasing anything that was in closed session that can be released. I have no problem with any of that. This particular one, because it is \$7.5 million +, and I believe the residents of the Town of Aurora, it is their money, they need to know the details around this now.

?I have read the report, there is nothing in there that could cause harm to the corporation. A sentence or two, let's remove them if that is the case. The purchase price is public, there is no hiding that. The details around the two reports should be public and I don't understand the rationale behind this. I think I do, but? hopefully the public will see that as well.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter