

Financial clarity on big-ticket Council items could soon be made public

Confidential materials, including costs, on some key recent municipal decisions could soon be made public following last week's Committee of the Whole meeting.

On March 10, Council gave the green light to a series of motions that will, if this decision is ratified by Council at the end of the month, see confidential reports related to recently-approved renovations to Victoria Hall, the work of Aurora's Economic Development Corporation (AEDC) Board, and behind-the-scenes discussions related to Hillary House, Henderson Forest, and 1289 Wellington Street East made public.

First to be discussed at last week's Committee meeting was a motion from Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo directing staff to present a report outlining municipal funds allocated to the AEDC, a breakdown of all its expenditures, external funding received, and a comparison between its approved budget and actual expenditures.

"The AEDC plays an advisory role in supporting economic development initiatives in our community, its Board makes recommendations regarding activities and initiatives intended to support business attraction, investment, and economic growth in Aurora," said Councillor Gallo last week. "However, the financial structure around these initiatives is somewhat unique. The AEDC itself does not approve expenditures, nor does it maintain standalone financial statements; instead, funding these initiatives through the Town's Economic Development Division and is administered through the Town's financial system and budgets. Because of that structure, there is currently no single consolidated report that shows Council or the public the full financial picture of these initiatives associated with the AEDC."

The motion, he said, was not about questioning the value of economic development initiatives, but about ensuring Council "as stewards of public funds" maintains "clear and accessible reporting for the community we serve."

"This motion is simply about transparency and good governance," he said. "As members of Council, we all have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure there is clear oversight of how public funds are being used, providing a detailed report outlining the total budget allocated, the expenditures and external funding, and a comparison between approved budgets and actual spending will give Council and the community a better understanding of how these economic development initiatives are being funded and implemented. The motion also asks that this reporting occur annually going forward so that Council and residents have consistent transparency year after year."

The second motion, brought forward by Mayor Tom Mrakas, calls a review of what materials can be made public on the purchase of lands known as Henderson Forest, discussions concerning Hillary House National Historic Site, and property matters associated with 1289 Wellington Street East.

"Why did you choose these properties in particular?" asked Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Mayor Mrakas replied they were files Council was finished with "and I just felt we should provide the documentation and whatever can be provided to the public out of closed session should be provided at all times."

"I actually have a motion coming next month to create a policy to ensure that these things get done with and we don't need these motions to come anymore individually and everything, once able to, will be released," he said. "By all means, if you have others that you want in there, you can make an amendment and add them. The more the merrier!"

"I think this is a great start," said Councillor Gaertner. "I believe it is somewhere in our Procedural Bylaw that once this information is no longer confidential that it can be disclosed to the public, so I'd like to see that it's just automatically done."

Disclosures related to Victoria Hall renovations were subject of a motion from Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

The motion calls for all non-confidential documentation related to the refurbishments of Victoria Hall approved by Council last month.

Doing so is a matter of straightforward transparency," he said.

"Council recently approved an increase Victoria Hall refurbishment budget from \$500,000 to approximately \$2.18 million. That represents a significant change in the financial scope of this project and understandably has generated a great deal of public interest and discussion," said Councillor Gallo. "Residents want to understand how and why this increase occurred. They want to see the information that informed Council's decision, including the engineering findings, design work, cost estimates that led to the revised budget. That is a reasonable expectation when millions of taxpayer dollars are involved. The motion before [Council] simply directs staff to comply and release all non-confidential documentation related to that increase. This includes engineering and structural reports, architectural design consultant reports, the class D cost estimate dated December 1, 2025, project scope documents, and any other technical or supporting documentation relied upon in preparing the report, recommending the budget increase.

"Importantly, this motion fully acknowledges that some information may need to be protected. Procurement integrity, legal considerations, or third-party confidentiality obligations must always be respected. That is why the motion clearly allows for appropriate redactions where required under legislation or procurement rules. But where information can be shared, it should be shared. Transparency strengthens public confidence in municipal decision-making. When residents can see the information that informed Council's decision, it allows them to better understand the challenges associated with restoring an aging historic building and the factors that contributed to the increased costs.

"This motion is not about relitigating decision Council has already made. That decision has been taken. This motion is about ensuring that residents have access to the information that led to that decision."

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