

Future of Armoury, Victoria Hall and Petch House up for review

By Brock Weir

As consultants fan out across Aurora's downtown core to develop a vision for a 'cultural precinct,' a wider net will soon be cast to determine the future of Library Square, Victoria Hall, the historic Aurora Armoury and Petch House.

According to the report before Council this week from Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, the \$46,595 study, set to be taken out by AECOM Architects, will look at the underutilized structures with an eye for 'repurposing' in the context of a larger plan.

With all but Petch House situated within the same area already being studied under the plan for the Cultural Precinct, however, Councillors questioned whether approving this new contract was unnecessarily doubling up on work.

'Why would we be spending the money twice?' asked Councillor Jeff Thom. 'We could be giving the guy studying the Cultural Precinct the scope of work to look at those four buildings and their uses and kill two birds with one stone. It seems to me like double dipping.'

This was a view shared by Councillor Tom Mrakas, who questioned whether the Town had ever had two consultants working at one time on 'cross purposes.' While Mr. Downey could not think of another instance where this might be the case, he said they would be looking at independent issues.

'The overreaching thought with regards to the Cultural Precinct was they were looking at the entire precinct and the thought they are going to look at the option of whether those buildings remain or are repurposed,' said Mr. Downey. '[The other consultant] is only going to be looking at repurposing. It will not be an option for them to destroy the buildings.'

Victoria Hall, he added, has never been examined with an eye to its 'highest and best use', while Petch House and the Armoury were examined from different angles when they became functional municipal facilities.

'If you keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results, you're a fool. I wanted to look at this differently.'

Councillor Michael Thompson, on the other hand, said he believed there was value in carrying out both studies. Council, he said, has made a firm resolution to make a decision on the future of Library Square and examining it as one 'Cultural Precinct' is just one approach.

While he would put his money on the prediction the first study will recommend the demolition of the old Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre for a new community space, a public square or otherwise, that is just one vision.

'The Cultural Precinct provides one approach, but if that is not satisfactory in the end to Council then this report does provide us with an alternative on what to do with those facilities,' said Councillor Thompson. 'That is the question we have been grappling with for the five years that I have been on Council. One way or another, we'll answer that question at the end of this term and, to me, that is the justification for moving forward with two reports. Even though it might seem in opposite directions, it may help us make that final determination on what to do with those buildings.'

Councillor Harold Kim offered similar sentiments, noting that in an ideal world a report would be done first on the repurposing, which would then be made available to the consultants looking at the 'Cultural Precinct' for their review.

'I think it is worth the duplication in some regard,' he said. 'I don't think there will be much when looking at the variables.'

Added Councillor Mrakas: 'A lot of time has been spent around the table talking about how we don't have enough information to

make a decision, but [with these reports] we will have all the information possible afforded to us, and not just for us, but the citizens of the Town. They will have as much information as possible where finally, after close to 20 years, we can make a decision on this area.?