

Joint Operations Centre plan splits Council ahead of next week's vote



By Brock Weir

Aurora's proposed new Joint Operations Centre will move forward for the next step in its approval next week.

Councillors signed off on the building itself, as well as a tentative plan to pay for the new Industrial Parkway North facility, which will combine Aurora's Parks and Recreation Department with the Department of Public Works under one roof.

The building will replace the current works yard on Scanlon Court which has been characterised as outmoded and run-down in serving today's population. The current price tag of \$19 million, however, comes in significantly higher than the previously estimated \$14.6M approved last year, and although Mayor and Councillors agree that a new facility is needed, the increasing costs and scale of the project split Council at a Special Committee meeting last week.

According to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, the increasing costs can be attributed to topographical challenges on the site, including soil stability, the general increase in construction costs, as well as a boost in contingency funds.

A series of retaining walls and other mechanisms will be put in place to make the site workable, as well as considerations for the local environment given its proximity to the Aurora Community Arboretum, and the wellhead protection area.

At the end of the day, staff argued Aurora was still getting a good deal compared to other options out there for industrial land, but some Councillors were not convinced of the numbers.

'When we first discussed this project we were going to take \$7 million from [the sale of] Leslie Street [lands] and \$3 million from Scanlon and now we're saying we can't realise that,' said Councillor Gallo, noting his concern that a funding plan can't be finalized until final costs are known. 'I don't know if that is shocking to anyone else, but I am being told until the final cost is known, I assume once it was built, we will have a bill and that will determine what the final cost will be. I have issues with making a decision to spend \$19 million without knowing where that money is coming from.'

Councillor Chris Ballard said although he supported the construction of a new facility from the start as the current building will not serve the needs of a growing community, he balked at the budget increase and 'extras' such as a green roof and increased storage facilities, being considered to the bottom line.

'We're being presented with a fait accompli [and] I am not comfortable with where the building is today, let alone adding more things to it,' he said, noting he was not in favour of plans to use future development charges to fund construction. 'Using DCs might not impact current taxpayers but in my mind they are a form of tax. Raising it won't hurt current residents in town but it is not fair to new residents coming into Aurora. Is that fair? I am not too sure that it is. Even if they are not yet here in Aurora, I want to make sure that we're spending their money wisely.'

?Quite often the hardest decision a politician has to make is to say no.?

For others, however, it was a ?tough? decision but one that needed to be made.

?The taxpayers ultimately elected us to make decisions,? said Councillor John Abel. ?[Costs] are a little bit more than we had anticipated and it still comes in at a market value. It is central, it is practical and it is a large piece of land that will serve the purposes that we have deemed.?

For Councillor Michael Thompson, going forward with the new building is a necessity rather than a want and band-aid solutions on the current site were just not working.

?We need to acknowledge we need a facility that meets our needs,? said Councillor Thompson. ?That has been a key consideration for this entire term. We're building more trails, there are more homes coming into 2C and yet we're not creating or building that infrastructure to take care of those and manage the operations of the Town.

?You can turn this down but that cannot deny the fact we need to do it and delaying it is only going to increase the costs. The building is not going to get any cheaper.?

Arguments were also made by Councillors in opposition to the plan that this was not a decision to be made in an election year, but this was a position Mayor Geoffrey Dawe rejected as it is a decision, he said, which has to be made now.

?We are here to make decisions and are here to move the Town forward,? he said. ?No one is happy with the price increase. Price increases happen and our staff needs to be far more intelligent in terms of managing these projects and some of that is underway in terms of correcting those.

?Saying no is a tough decision. Saying yes, but not right now, is a cop out, quite frankly.?

All of this will be financed through a debt financing plan devised by Town Treasurer Dan Elliott. As The Auroran reported last week, the plan includes the application for a grant through Ontario's Green Municipal Fund, which is still pending, and the opening up of lines of credit which would eventually be paid through future development charges coming in from Aurora's 2C lands, as well as the sale of industrial lands owned by the Town along the Leslie Street corridor.

Additional options were considered early in the project including borrowing internally from Aurora's \$34m+ Hydro Reserve fund and the sale of the current Scanlon Court works yard. Although Mr. Elliott said the Hydro option was met with opposition, the sale of Scanlon remains on the table, but is pending the relocation of the land's purchaser.