

Large investment needed for Downtown revamp, Council agrees

By Brock Weir

A potential \$10 million investment in the revitalization of Aurora's Downtown Core was approved by Council last week, but the big question is just what this revitalization will look like.

Council signed off on a "notional agreement" that a "big number" was needed to get people thinking seriously about what to do with the Downtown Core following the recommendation from Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny in the latest step of the Town's Cultural Precinct Plan.

"A large investment is required to advance this development," said Mr. Nadorozny at last week's Council meeting, whose report recommended this maximum of \$10 million be taken from Aurora's Hydro Reserves. "If we get past that tonight, the next step from us is bringing a report back [outlining] the whole consultation process and timelines to get that process to milestone four. Council would see that before we initiate anything and we would provide them with an opportunity to make sure it is comprehensive enough, touches the community enough, and make sure there is enough time for Council to mull over the information."

Move past it they did and the next update is expected to come to the Council table next week.

Last Tuesday's decision came on the heels of a repurposing study looking at the future use of many amenities around Aurora including the historic Armoury and the buildings currently occupying Library Square on Victoria Street.

This repurposing study, along with the vision for the Cultural Precinct presented to Council earlier this year, both left some members of Council wanting more. But this was a good first step.

"The goal is for this Council to make a decision this year on what we're going to use those two buildings for and those other concepts that have been presented," said Councillor Michael Thompson, referencing the old homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre which, although rented out to businesses and community groups, have had question marks over their respective roofs for nearly 20 years. "We have heard time and time again that even if we were to keep the buildings as is, we would need significant funds to bring them up to code. We have put that off year after year because we have been unsure of the future use of those buildings, so I appreciate the work done here."

"I certainly don't agree with all of the ideas presented, but I look forward to getting to the next milestone and continue moving down this path so we, as a group, [and] community can decide on what to do with the Downtown."

For Councillor Sandra Humfries, having all the information presented to Council over the past two decades in one package was welcome. Although Council might have disagreements over some of the proposals, the information is vital to move forward, she said. A similar view was offered by Councillor Jeff Thom, who said while he didn't agree with everything that was in either study, it "gives Council some ideas on what we can possibly do with those buildings."

"It is nice to know we're taking a step forward," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "Everyone will be talking about the Cultural Precinct and Repurposing, but I would like us to keep in mind the revitalization of Yonge Street. The revitalization of Yonge Street is a primary concern of the Town. If you look at Yonge Street going south all the way down to Henderson, that area is really in trouble, so I would like to make sure that we, as a Council, don't do anything with the Cultural Precinct historic area that is going to take away from the revitalization of Yonge Street."

In the eyes of Councillor John Abel, this revitalization was one piece that was "lacking" in both reports.

"Lacking in this report is [anything] about a museum, nothing about a gathering place, nothing about revitalization," he said. "There are no capital gains and no metrics to measure on how is this going to impact the revitalization. I think it is important that before we invest in anything and change anything that we should be able to understand that, if we do something, is that is going to advance it."

?We have never explored as a Council what something would look like if we went with Library Square. We're not addressing parking except in the Cultural Precinct [concept plan]; we're going to build a four-storey parking garage between our beautiful Cultural Centre and our magnificent library. We can explore other ideas. This is not the close of it. We can have other ideas. I am very hopeful we can have that opportunity.

?We have put in a lot of money, resources, and time. I feel if I was a teacher grading all this so far I would just give it a pass, maybe a D. I would think we would all strive for an A+ [with] any idea that we're moving forward. I am looking forward to the opportunity of consulting our businesses, our committees, and a full consultation and engagement of all of our residents before we make any decisions.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas, on the other hand, offered a more encouraging report card saying there is enough at the table to get an A+ plan that is ?extraordinary? for the community.

?There is a lot of stuff in this one that I don't agree with, but there is lots of stuff I do agree with,? said Councillor Mrakas. ?I think there is a lot of work that needs to be done and I will be very happy to see what the public has to say when it comes back to us for those next steps. I think we're going to be developing that is going to be best for the community as a whole and revitalize that downtown.

?I think the best possible scenario starts with taking down those two buildings in Library Square. That is where you begin. I think that is a good start for me. I agree that we need to take this to the residents. I would love to see us utilize social media because I think that is a great way to get the word out there and have people answer questions and get it back to us.?