

Library Square decision 'pivotal' in Aurora's history, say cultural groups



By Brock Weir

The Library Square is a 'golden opportunity' that shouldn't get bogged down in the 'minutiae', according to Bruce Gorman, CEO of the Aurora Public Library.

Mr. Gorman, who took the helm of the Aurora Public Library (APL) last summer, was one of five delegates to appear at last Thursday's Special Council Meeting where local lawmakers signed off on the redevelopment of Library Square, including the three-storey addition to Church Street School, and the year-round outdoor gathering place between the school building and APL itself.

'It was almost nine years ago that I stood in front of Council in Halifax and asked them to approve the Halifax Central Library project,' he told Aurora Council. 'Fortunately, on that day, they did. That was the day that changed the City of Halifax forever. Looking back now, my hopes and dreams were realised like I couldn't have imagined - an architectural gem for the city, a beacon on the landscape, iconic, but, most importantly, it was what went on inside the facility: the relationships, the art, the culture, the education, the events, the endless activities that informed people's lives in Halifax for years and generations to come.'

'Right now, here tonight, the same opportunity is here in Aurora. I never thought I would have this opportunity to be a part of something again, but I do. Will it be easy? No, it won't. This is from a lot of experience. Will you have questions answered to everything right now, tomorrow or the next day? You will not, but you have time. We have to move forward now and answer some of those important questions. It is important you realise how important tonight is here in Aurora. I come from experience, this is a golden opportunity for everybody here in Aurora to step up and make today, this day, the day we say 'Aurora changed

forever.'?

That being said, Mr.

Gorman said he had questions of his own, chief among them were parking issues on site. Parking, he said, was always going to be an important issue but he said he was somewhat heartened by a parking plan that went along with the Library Square approval. It provided some short-term and long-term strategies.

He also added he

would like Council to consider a bridge between the new Church Street School addition and APL down the line to increase the interconnectedness of the square.

Joining the APL at

the podium were representatives from the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Aurora Business Improvement Area (BIA), the Aurora Cultural Centre, and the public at large.

Sandra Ferri,

Executive Director of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, said the Chamber was 'excited' about the Library Square initiative, but said Chamber members still have many questions, primarily about the amount of traffic that will come into the Downtown Core as a result and the impact this might have on vacant businesses.

'Vacancies in

business environments are never a good thing,' said Ms. Ferri. 'Revitalization and improvements to the Downtown Core of Aurora to increase and draw more people to the downtown core and to Aurora in general is beneficial to all businesses in Aurora. The Aurora Chamber of Commerce is excited about this initiative as improvements to the Downtown Core are sure to increase traffic to the businesses and improve economic development in Aurora.

'While we are excited

about this initiative, we are also cautious of the increased expenses associated with this initiative and request that the Town continue to provide updates on taxation, operational implications that the Chamber can share with its members.'

Joanne Russo,

representing the Downtown BIA, said they too were 'excited' about the plan and offered nothing but positives.

'We, as a Board, feel

the development of Library Square will build and revitalize the Downtown Core and bring a stronger community,' she said. 'We are excited to be part of the new transformation to our Town as we feel it will bring residents, visitors and businesses together, not only today but for generations to come. Together with the development of Library Square and the BIA, the Downtown Core will become the jewel of Aurora once again, while embracing our heritage and celebrating

the future ahead.?

During her time at the podium, Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, said that during the planning process for Library Square, the Cultural Centre submitted a letter outlining in broad strokes where the organization currently stands and where it intends to be in the future, including the 'cultural infrastructure' needed to realise those goals.

Purpose-built cultural space, she said, was important, along with studies to ensure that such space is viable. Much of the work in this regard was in the report before Council, she said.

Although their letter did not indicate the importance of food service, Ms. Haines told Council that she was pleased to see culinary services are still in consideration as part of the Church Street addition.

'A glass of wine, a good dinner and desserts after are part of a fulsome experience as consuming art is a social activity where discussion is often sought after,' she said. 'Also, other users will want to be able to get a quick lunch or snack as they use the facility for classes or wait for kids in the sunshine of the piazza. Ideally this space could be leased to a commercial food entity and provide a supportive revenue source that compliments the overall plan for public-private activation in the whole of downtown and throughout the BIA district.

'Our hope is to help make this project something the community can be proud of and make excellent use of. As we have seen in many other communities where there is an investment in cultural infrastructure, it has a positive ripple effect on the quality of life in a community. We look forward to seeing this project move forward and will continue to work with our cultural partners, community stakeholders, project consultants and Town Council and staff.'

Last up to speak was local heritage advocate David Heard, who said the residents and business owners in Aurora's Downtown Core still had lingering concerns over the Library Square plans.

'This is no slam dunk, I can tell you that right now,' said Mr. Heard. 'The concerns were, of course, parking. The concerns were the costs running forward, what is it going to cost to run, will it run at a deficit? The cost was shocking to a lot of people in these economic times. The other thing was I heard the other day there were two committee members who spoke about this build and one of them, I'll call him an expert who did a historic building on Mosley, he spoke of concerns about the water in the area. We know there is Niagara Falls going under that area.

?In 2011, I spoke about a possible godsend to this area for parking was an adjacent property, approximately 80 steps. It takes less than a minute to walk to this property. The shocking thing that happened today was I got a phone call from the owner of that property and there is an interest to make the property available. So, if the public has any concerns about parking, I think the problems may have just gotten completely wiped out.?