

Library Square development takes significant step forward



By Brock Weir

After nearly 20 years of debate, Council last week firmed up its vision for Library Square.

On an 8 ? 1 vote, local lawmakers approved schematic designs for a significant addition to the Church Street School, which is currently home to both the Aurora Cultural Centre and the Aurora Museum & Archives.

Although final designs for the amenities contained within the extension still need to be drafted, and the final costs of the building still need to be approved by Council, Tuesday's decision approved in principle a three-storey extension to the historic building, including a 200 seat theatre.

Council's approval also greenlit the construction of a new parking lot and laneway for Library Square, the construction of which will begin soon pending final designs and costing estimates.

For many Council members, last week's decision was an important ? and overdue ? step forward.

?This is something I am in support of moving forward with,? said Councillor Jeff Thom. ?Councils of many varieties in Town have been trying to do something in this area, and I think it is a significant step to do something positive that will have a massive effect on our downtown.

?We have talked a lot in this term, and for many terms, about revitalizing our downtown and driving investment not only from the public sector, but the private sector, into the downtown and I think this is a good first step in the process and I am really excited [that] as we move forward this will be a dynamic space for the Town of Aurora and will set us on a path for revitalizing Yonge Street and the Downtown.?

ENTHUSIASM NOT SHARED BY ALL COUNCIL MEMBERS

Not all Council members were equally enthusiastic, however.

Among those most critical of the plan were Councillors John Abel and Wendy Gaertner.

Speaking against the proposal ? and his was the lone vote against it at the end of the debate ? Councillor Abel once again reiterated his view that Library Square was not an ideal spot for a community gathering space.

?I harken back to the best community space we have available still, our Armoury,? said Councillor Abel, who previously suggested

razing the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre for a community building. ?It is ground-level, multipurpose and [in light of our deal with Niagara college] we now have to build a community space.?

To this end, the Councillor took aim at the design of Library Square itself, which will move the area's current parking configuration which now stands between the Library and Church Street School, moving the bulk of it to Victoria Street on the site of the old Seniors' Centre. This new space, he contended, would not help community groups displaced by the demolition of the old Library, such as the Aurora Bridge Club, find a new home, either.

?We are spending \$5 million on the Armoury, \$26 million on this new theatre, and we haven't addressed any of the community space needs of our community,? he continued. ?We did all this vast consultation back in 2015 and 2016. The last thing we did on the Cultural Precinct was we all met here and we asked a question: what would bring you downtown. I don't think we need to build this building, and we don't need to build this building and we can redesign library square. That would be in the best interests of the Library and accessibility and the best interests of financial prudence and fiscal responsibility.?

Councillor Gaertner also shared Councillor Abel's concerns over the number of accessible parking spaces, citing the thousands of people who visit the Library now who say there currently aren't enough accessible parking spaces to meet the needs. This demand, she said, is only going to grow as the Boomer generation ages.

Another key issue for her was the lack of detail on just what is going to be going into this new building and how it would be operated.

?I certainly hope for the good of the community, the good of our tax dollars, that this building will have some very serious energy planning,? she said. ?We don't have a business plan [for the building], we don't have an operations plan, we don't have an activities plan, we don't know how many staff are going to be needed, we don't know how much money this is going to cost the taxpayer [in] operating. I am very disappointed we're being asked to approve something in principle without having these details.

?We have spent a long time coming to this point and we have to congratulate ourselves; this is the first Council of five Councils that has figured out what to do with the square. We should all be patting ourselves on the back, but we shouldn't be rushing at this point with all of these important details.?

COMMITMENT ON VISION IS IMPORTANT FOR SEEKING GRANT MONEY: STAFF

But these important details will be fleshed out once detailed design work on the building addition gets underway, argued supporters of the plan, including Councillor Paul Pirri who said Council could agree to spend \$5 million to put up a ?shack? in Library Square but would still have to go through this very process to figure out design and operational costs.

?The operational costs are very different between a reproduction of the armoury on this site, just an empty square box where we can stuff as many people as possible, whenever, whenever they would like to go. This little small box will fit everyone where ever they need it, no problems, no questions asked. But the operational cost changes if we look at a two-storey building or a three storey building. I don't know how we can expect staff to come back to us with operational costs if we don't give them a direction to go in.

?I agree wholeheartedly with Councillor Gaertner that we need to get some operational plans going so we fully understand what we're going to be spending our money on and how that is going to work out in the long run. Until we provide staff with a direction, I don't know how they come back and answer those questions. It would be very difficult for an expectation of not putting the cart before the horse, as has been said, by just saying give us the operational costs. I think if you're going to do a good job of giving us operational costs we need to know what we're talking about as opposed to some general rough ideas and?the information might not be correct.?

CAO Doug Nadorozny added that firming up a plan at the Council table, even in principle, is essential for Town Staff going forward and seeking grants and Federal funding to make this building a reality.

Councillor Michael Thompson and Tom Mrakas were also on similar wavelengths.

?I think we can discuss the details and finer points, but in general this satisfies what the vision has always been,? said Councillor Thompson. ?It has always been about creating a community asset, developing a gathering space, and there has actually always been reference to building an addition to Church Street School. It has always been part of the vision, even prior to me coming onto Council. There was always talk about building another community facility as part of the overall vision. It is part of our downtown revitalization strategy, it is one component we keep looking at. For myself, knowing different reports and knowing the global vision about creating that gathering space and having an additional building, I always saw it as a considerable investment.

?Any time you're looking at building a facility, which was always part of the plan, you knew it was going to be a considerable investment. The investment's worth it, it is for our community and it is going to help revitalize the downtown over the long period. It

is going to stimulate development, it is going to stimulate rebirth of different restaurants and retail outlets and so forth, and it is going to bring people from the four corners to Downtown. I think we have all wanted to see something special there. We may not all agree on the finer points, but we all agree that we want something special there, something to revitalize the downtown core and create a unique identity.?

Added Councillor Mrakas: ?We have heard from our residents loud and clear when it comes to Library Square and downtown revitalization. Doing no more and no less and sticking with the status quo is unacceptable to residents. They want bold vision and this is what Council has given them. This is providing an excellent opportunity, an exciting opportunity for our downtown. It is exactly what the residents have asked for. We're giving it to them, we're making a decision, we're moving forward and I am proud of this Council in doing it.?