

Library Square moves forward to next phase

By Brock Weir

The next phase in coming up with a design for the future of Library Square received the green light at Council last week following a contentious debate.

Concept plans for the future use of the large swath of land on Victoria Street, currently occupied by the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre, which Council recently decided to raze, are due to come before Council by the end of March following the timeline approved on February 14.

Work on the concept plan will be carried out by FOTENN Consulting, the firm which developed concept plans for Aurora's Cultural Precinct which left many elected officials feeling cold.

When direction was given by Council to move forward with the demolition and to suggest a process to move forward with the ultimate design, we looked at the unfinished work that FOTENN has already been engaged for and there was a possibility of some overlap with the new process [they] had already been basically contracted to do," said Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny. "We gave them the opportunity to consider the next steps and fulfil the work within their existing contract only and that is why this makes it clear that within their existing contract they would only complete the first steps and, if Council was pleased with the work and wanted to extend that work, there would be a decision later for Council to decide whether or not to engage them to do any of the following three steps. This is merely an opportunity to use them for work they already started and was stopped prematurely."

Council was not unanimously pleased with the work done thus far, however, approving the next steps on a vote of 6 to 3. Voting against the plan were Councillors John Abel, Wendy Gaertner, and Jeff Thom.

Councillor Abel, a vocal critic of FOTENN's previous work, which suggested a parking structure to be built between the Aurora Public Library and Cultural Centre, a mixed use building for Library Square including residential, a pedestrian corridor connecting Library Square and Town Park alongside Trinity Anglican Church, and a significant overhaul of Town Park itself, said it was time to get a fresh perspective.

"We should be doing an RFP," he said, suggesting the contract should be re-issued with a focus on urban design. "If we're doing something really good and we're giving \$20,000 to FOTENN, for me it is like a big dinner and we're going to make it with leftovers. We should be allowed to explore other designers and architects going forward. I think we have exhausted what's there. We can draw what we can from it, but I think it is time after all these years to now engage an RFP process so we can have some great ideas and some great designs."

Councillor Gaertner was of a similar view, suggesting the right way forward was moving ahead with a firm that "does nothing but specialize in downtown revitalization projects."

"I think that where the mistake was made right in the beginning," she said. "FOTENN has a great reputation [but] downtown revitalization is not their specialty. That is what I can tell from the research I have done. I think we owe it to our public to put forward the best possible design and, to me, the best possible design has to come from planners that spend their whole career doing this."

Added Councillor Thom: "If we want to move through these six steps and we want to get an expert on urban design, urban squares and the revitalization of downtown, I think we have to look at an urban architect of some kind and we could start that right now." They were, however, in the minority.

For most other members of Council time was of the essence in order to deliver a final design for Library Square before the end of this Council term and, at the end of the day, it was important, they said, to allow FOTENN to take the feedback they received from Council and the public alike and finish the work they started.

"We have a responsibility to let them finish the work," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "If you think about it, they did what we asked: we hired them to conduct engagement sessions, gather all this feedback and present us with an initial concept plan. It wasn't the concept plan and things went sideways at that time because that concept plan didn't mirror the vision that collectively we shared around the table. We never gave them the opportunity [to do something with that feedback] and there is a responsibility for us to at least allow them to carry on to March and April so that we can then make a decision on whether or not that is the right thing for us or not. I respect those who say they just don't think FOTENN will be able to capture the vision they have and that's fine, and if that's your feeling, by all means vote against the motion."

Councillors Paul Pirri and Tom Mrakas echoed these sentiments, with Councillor Pirri saying concept plans are just that "building blocks that can be further developed. Councillor Mrakas also noted that it is important for FOTENN to provide options.

?If they haven't captured what we want, we can say we're not happy with this,? said Councillor Mrakas. ?It might even just be a matter of just tweaking a little bit of what they present us. I am confident they will take what we're asking for and they will give us something we're looking for. I think, at the end of the day, it will be something we can be proud of as a Council, and I think the community can be proud of.?