

Library Square offers 'extraordinary moment' for Aurora: Planner

By Brock Weir

Approving the construction of Library Square will be an 'extraordinary moment' in the efforts to revitalize Aurora's Downtown, according to planners behind two design options up for Council consideration this week.

'Building a public square is a bold initiative that will leave a legacy for future generations,' said David Leinster of The Planning Partnership, one of a team of planners that has developed two distinct visions for Library Square, designs which are up for final approval at Council this week. 'We imagine that this square is multipurpose, flexible and programmable space for many, many activities in the Downtown. A place that would build on the already great programming of the public park just a block away. This should be a space for all seasons, for children and families, and it should be a place for the everyday, a place for some potential commercial activity that would animate the square at different times of day and throughout the seasons.'

'It is critical, in our minds, that this is a connecting space.'

Guiding their vision, he said, is the idea that Library Square, regardless of which configuration ultimately wins the day, should be framed by strong architecture, architecture now embodied by the Aurora Cultural Centre and the Aurora Public Parking.

That is why the proposed public square is designed to fit in between the two existing buildings, rather than on the site of the soon-to-be-demolished old homes of the public library and seniors' centre on Victoria Street, as was originally envisioned. Instead, the space left by these two buildings will provide parking to the north and, to the south, a new community building that will be an extension of the Cultural Centre.

'The vision for the Aurora Town Square is a place that links these two civic buildings, these two institutions, that is a central gathering space in the heart of Aurora's cultural precinct,' said Mr. Leinster, illustrating his point with visions of outdoor skating rinks, spaces for community meals, and even movie screenings. 'There are many things that could happen in this square, a variety of scales.'

Another factor in the plan is considering Library Square as a place to shoulder some of the burden currently carried by nearby Town Park. Planners consider their plan as a connection to the historic greenspace, linked by Mosley Street, and interconnected.

That is why locating Library Square off Victoria Street did not fit in with the vision,' he said.

'One of the positives with having this square located on Victoria was that there wouldn't be a change to the parking and library delivery functions; that if we looked at an option where the Cultural Centre and a new community space were separated to frame this public space, then it would be framed by architecturally strong buildings and the Cultural Centre would have the ability to activate that location.'

'Our big concern with the location of the public square on Victoria is that it doesn't connect directly with the Library. We think that is critical because the Library and the Cultural Centre, in our mind, not only form out an architectural frame but also the potential to animate this public space and that, in our mind, is critical. [The design options are] in the centre of the entire block, and in terms of the expansion of the Cultural Centre as a community facility, it links very nicely to that addition.'

'The negatives here are that the parking will have to be redistributed somewhere and the library deliveries are obviously an issue. We wanted to carve out 1,500 square metres of programmable space at a minimum. We think that is an adequate size for the square here, to provide barrier free access, increase the pedestrian connection through the site, and maintain accessible parking.'

Points in favour of Option 1, the raised square, from the planners' perspective, is it allows for a new 'beautiful, architectural pavilion' as a new entrance to the Library, but a drawback is it largely covers the lower half of the Library's west façade.

Option 2, the 'lowered square' option, ticks all the boxes, he said.

'It would be very much a public space that could be open much of the time to link people from Victoria down through and into the square, with the potential midblock connection to the east, a space that would navigate the contemporary architecture of the new community building with the former school houses as well,' he said.

'[The lower square] does have better visibility from Church Street and from Yonge Street in terms of being a lower option you can see down into. It doesn't separate itself from those adjacencies as does the raised options.'

Yet, Option 2 moves parking away from the Library itself, an issue which not only raised alarm bells from the Library but amongst Council as well.

'My main concern with both of the designs is the public has a certain service level now with respect to parking and dropping off books, and particular dropping off children and seeing them go safely into the building,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'I don't think the public is going to appreciate us decreasing what they will perceive to be their service level and I am also concerned about

the accessible parking. We're aging and there is going to be more demand for that.?

In response, Mr. Leinster stated he understood it would there would be a ?sacrifice? and would mean ?a change for everyone? but there was ample on-street parking within a five minute walking radius of the whole area.?