

Library Square set for fall demolition following Bridge battle

By Brock Weir

Community groups occupying the former Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre buildings on Victoria Street will have to vacate to make way for the wrecking ball by October 1.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, reaffirmed its decision to clear the buildings to make way for the demolition and ultimate construction of Library Square after a lengthy debate last week.

Near the start of talks, Council members heard a delegation from Olly Smolak of the Aurora Bridge Club who, on behalf of the group which currently calls the Old Library home, said they were at an impasse with Town Staff on finding a suitable new home that meets the needs of their large organization.

As The Auroran reported last week, the Aurora Bridge Club was feeling the heat of the move.

They estimate to accommodate their 932-strong membership at their busiest times they would need to lease a space of at least 2,000 square feet.

However, at this time, the best alternative the Town could open up was 800 square feet.

"What we pay now in rent allows us to offer a reasonable price for people who are playing bridge," he said, noting that leasing a privately-owned space to meet their standards could cost up to \$6,000 a month.

Raising member fees could give the Club \$2,000 a month to work with, but no more.

While Council members said they sympathized, tasking staff to continue to work with the tenants, they largely agreed they had to continue moving forward.

Speaking against the full-speed-ahead approach, however, were Councillors John Abel and Wendy Gaertner who said they objected to moving forward with the demolition plan for Library Square before designs were ready on what will ultimately replace the buildings.

"To do the demolition, you should have the design and funding all approved and in place," said Councillor Abel. "To demolish it just for the sake of demolishing it and then go through the process, it could be months or years before we get the final design and the funding all in order. It would make more sense to put the design and the funding in place and then say it is time to do the demolition.

"We are not doing anything right and we haven't done it from the very beginning. We should be thinking long-term and planning ahead. Why we are doing this to our community is beyond me. I can't support anything unless we put things in place. It would be like tearing down an arena and telling the kids you can't play hockey anymore, and we don't know if we're ever going to build one again, so go and play somewhere else."

Others, however, disagree and said demolition is the necessary first step in creating something that will ultimately address the crunch for public spaces.

"We are challenged," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "The Town continues to grow and we don't have enough public community spaces and we don't have enough sports facilities. We continue to look this term at addressing all of those needs and art of the driver on library square has been the fact there is a plan to build a facility adjacent to the Church Street School to accommodate more public space. We as a group made a choice to move forward with the demolition of those facilities."

Similar viewpoints were offered by Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Paul Pirri who expressed a degree of frustration that what was once a nearly unanimous decision to proceed with demolition was now in question when confronted with needs of the Aurora Bridge Club particularly when there are other community groups who use the facilities as well.

"I have seen less flip-flopping at fishing tournaments than I have seen here tonight," said Councillor Pirri. "Council unanimously decided to move forward with the demolition of those buildings. To claim now that we weren't in favour of demolishing those buildings is disingenuous. We need to move forward. There are solutions to be found. It is difficult when you're staring at the problems now but I have full faith in being able to come to something that works for all of the tenants.

"We're doing this to build more community space. To be paralyzed by a catch 22 and not make a decision because it is easier than moving forward, that is not what we're elected to do. We're elected to move forward, we're here to make decisions and sometimes the tough decisions are the right decisions and in the long run this is the long decision. Nobody says it won't have growing pains but we need to move forward so this situation doesn't happen with Councils in the future."