

Library Square's future waits on support for Fab Lab?

By Brock Weir

When it comes to the future of Aurora's Library Square, the ball is now in the court of the Region of York and Seneca College.

Council made the decision last week to hold off on making a final decision on the future of the lands on Victoria Street currently occupied by the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre pending further information from the two parties.

Representatives from the Town of Aurora, the Region of York, and Seneca College have been in talks over the use of the old library building as a possible site for an innovation incubator or Fab Lab which could be used for research and development in partnership with the college.

The idea was first floated at Aurora's Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC). Councillor Michael Thompson, chair of EDAC, asked his fellow Councillors to defer the decision until at least October.

"We continue to discuss the use of an innovation hub and a Fab Lab and are currently waiting to hear back on the grant application that has been submitted to move this concept forward," said Councillor Thompson, noting staff estimated news would be forthcoming between September and October.

"The Region would like to make a presentation based upon that. It would be in everybody's best interest to delay it just a little longer to get confirmation back on what is happening with regards to that grant funding, and the ongoing discussions...on developing something on that site."

While the motion to delay ultimately passed the Council table, not all Councillors saw the value in holding off on a decision. Councillor Evelyn Buck, for instance, questioned whether their vision of a Fab Lab would be allowed in what is on the edge of a residential area.

"We have several industrial parks, which is the logical place for such a use," she said. "The old library is not a use for that and I will not support any further deferral for [what] the committee is thinking regarding this building. If you think you have seen controversy over the potential use of these buildings when all you have been talking about is replacing them with something similar, you ain't seen nothing yet from the people who live in that community about that proposal."

Some of her concerns stemmed from the potential use of machinery in the building. In previous reports both to Council and EDAC, municipal staff said one of the reasons Seneca College and the Region of York were interested in using the old Library building was the thick, sturdy floors built to withstand the weight of stacks would be able to accommodate machinery.

She also questioned the success of similar projects already brought to fruition in communities such as Markham and said staff had been directed to go to the community to look for possible future uses of the land, not entertaining preliminary proposals from the Region and Seneca.

The idea also failed to get the support of Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

"I think the idea of a Fab Lab is fascinating and I would love to see it in Aurora, but I consider this the community's land and, therefore, it needs to be public space," she said.

Speaking in favour of the motion and, in turn, the possibility of a Fab Lab, Councillor Paul Pirri said that machinery does not necessarily equate to "loud". One of the uses being investigated is 3D printing, a relatively quiet process using layers of plaster and other materials to create the end product. The Councillor said that was a viable use and something deserving serious consideration.

"This is an opportunity for people to come in, work together, work collaboratively on something," he said. "When you look at the

Cultural Centre and the Library, those are institutions to one extent or another. To have another facility where people can come in and work together creatively to do something outstanding I think is extremely important.?

Councillor John Abel expressed a similar view. Creativity, he said, would thrive in a place like a Fab Lab where people can come in and get the chance to develop unique and innovative ideas, engage youth with their ideas and provide opportunities for them as well. While he was supportive, he said he hoped there would be a way to bring in not only a Fab Lab but coordinate it to some of the other ideas gathered in public meetings, ranging from knocking the buildings down to create parking to a multiuse building.

?This is an opportunity to put something on the map, something stunning in that area architecturally [that is] also functional,? he said. ?I want [the future] report to outline what we have envisioned, along with the Fab Lab, along with the common area and parking.?

Speaking to the success innovation incubators in southern Ontario, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Councillor Thompson said it would be ?well worth? the time to allow for further consideration.

?[The site] borders on the Library and the Cultural Centre and they see it as a learning hub,? said Councillor Thompson. ?They see connectivity [with the neighbours] and it borders on Yonge Street and that location is one of the key drivers to it all.

?We need to wait until Seneca comes back to us with a sense and understanding of their approach in terms of what phase and how to move forward before we incorporate it into any design elements or additions to the space. [Once] the information around the grant is known, then we can make more concrete decisions and actually deal with this space and make a determination once and for all what the future holds.?

What do you think? Would you like to see a FabLab in the old library building, or do you support another use of the land? Send your thoughts to letters@auroran.com.