

More is less for Town Hall renovation plan: Councillors

By Brock Weir

Renovations for Aurora Town Hall have been delayed once again amid concerns Aurora would be getting less for a whole lot more.

Last winter, Council approved nearly \$843,000 to renovate the ground floor of Town Hall to create additional office space, a more accessible entrance, and a new customer service centre to accommodate future 'short term' growth.

Going out to tender, however, it was found the estimates severely undershot the mark. Bids before Council this month from five construction companies hovering in the neighbourhood of \$1.1 million. This was after the initial tender was recalled after bids came in significantly over budget. These bids were much reduced from their original scope to nix plans for more office space, to focus primarily on the customer service area.

'Renovations are always difficult to put an estimate to and the consultant working with staff are making their best efforts to have an accurate budget,' said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, responding to questions on how the results could be 'so out of whack' with what was originally budgeted for.

'The reality is when the contractors came in and made their evaluations, they are factoring risks that consultants may not have been sensitive to. It suggests the contractors were very familiar with the work that needed to be done to meet our specifications. Unfortunately, with that confidence, came that higher price.'

For many Councillors, the increased price for a decreased amount of work missed the mark. Councillor Evelyn Buck, for instance, said she was concerned there was nothing in the plan to address 'horrendously overcrowded' workspaces at Town Hall.

While Councillor Michael Thompson said he was concerned the window had passed to tackle the renovations during the summer while Council and committee meetings were largely on hiatus during the summer months, he also criticized the plan moving forward.

'The [old report] asks for \$842,000 for the renovation of the entire ground floor,' he said. '[An alternative] was a reduction in scope and that spoke poorly to that because it would cause some displacing of staff and it wouldn't necessarily resolve the issues we have.'

'Now we have a report before us saying, let's go forward, and I don't see anything in this report currently that speaks to those concerns. What is it going to cost us to fix the rest of the ground floor? The reason we were going to do the ground floor was that it would give a three to five year window so that corporate and finance would have that space to grow. Now we're taking little jigsaw pieces out of it and I have lost the big picture.'

Aurora CAO Neil Garbe said it was ultimately his call to reduce the scope on the project. When the tenders came back far above what was budgeted, he said he was not 'comfortable' asking Council for increased funds.

'The direction was to reduce the scope to fit in the budget that we have and we felt that the most significant aspects of this, if we had to reduce something, staff would live with what we've got for a number of years until the joint operations centre is done and we would then rethink our plans,' he said.

'It is not ideal by any stretch' but looking at our staffing forecast for this building over the next couple of years, it is not anticipated to change greatly.'

When the Joint Operations Centre is built on Industrial Parkway over the next three years, Council approved laying the ground work for the potential of adding more office space in the building should the need arise.

Councillors, however, asked for the report to be sent back to staff for further information addressing their concerns.

“We need an overview of where we’re at and what this is going to buy us and what the benefits are,” said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. “I need to visualize what it buys us and what the next steps are to get us where we thought we were going in the beginning of the program.”

Staff nevertheless had concerns about any further delays. Mr. Simanovskis said they have worked to move this through, addressing concerns as quickly as possible, and delays would “jeopardize” other schedules in the mix. That could come as early as next month.

“The information is not there, so I need all those other pieces even though it may jeopardize the project,” said Councillor Thompson.