

Museum moves forward as Council approves curator plan

By Brock Weir

A restored Aurora Museum is a go following Council approval last week.

Councillors threw out an RFP, which attracted a winning bid from Cultural Asset Management (CAM), as well as the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) and the Aurora Cultural Centre, at last Tuesday's Council meeting in favour of a motion to go back and simply hire a curator.

The new curator, likely to come from the AHS, will be in charge of the thousands of heritage artefacts in the Aurora Collection, as well as in curating and mounting shows at the new museum space, which will be established in the Aurora Room at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Sitting in General Committee the previous week, Councillors considered the recommendation from municipal staff to award a five-year contract to CAM for stewardship of the Aurora Collection. Controversy arose at the table, however, on the process of this RFP, and a motion this week from Councillor Evelyn Buck put the brakes on that recommendation.

In her motion, she called on Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, to prepare terms of reference to retain a curator to organize the museum space from the ground up. It followed a report received by Councillors last year calling on Mr. Downey to do exactly that. At the time, Councillors voted to seek other options resulting in the recommendation for CAM.

"It is no reflection on the work staff did," said Councillor Buck last week. "I believe they did everything they were required to do with their usual complete professional competence. We are simply exercising our authority to do something different.

"There is no question everyone has racked their brains about the best way to go, and so they have arrived at this point when all the work was done which proved not to be the best way to go, so I am going back to what was approved at the beginning of the term."

This motion was supported by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who has been a long-time advocate of making a new Aurora Museum a reality. In her view, there was already enough direction on the table from the previous report to go forward with hiring a curator in partnership with the AHS.

"Everything that needs to be done is right there," she said. "There is no need for staff to investigate further. I think the direction is clear. There is an opportunity here to get our museum finally moving. We have wasted over 14 months on this."

For Councillor Michael Thompson, it was clear to him, he said, that all Councillors support the re-establishment of the museum and it was something the community supports with "a sense of pride." Although each of them have put forward different visions on what that museum would ultimately look like, they have come full circle on their debates and are largely back where we started.

Others, however, were not quite as convinced. Among those speaking against going forward with preparing the terms of reference for a curator was Councillor Chris Ballard. While he said he "appreciated and agreed" the artefacts needed to be seen, it shouldn't be confined to this plan.

"The history of Aurora needs to be told outside of a room at the Church Street School," he said, before citing CAM's proposal. "It needs to be in our schools and our buildings, wherever people are. I am concerned that this may end up costing us a lot more than the proposal that is put before us.

"If we look at the cost of a curator at our current salary grid as opposed to an outside contractor, if we look at all the things they will have to do in terms of buying the equipment, displays and electronics, I suspect we are going to end up paying more for this than if we go with an outside supplier. Once we hire a curator, we will have to put significant funding into whatever it is they bring

forward. If we don't, it is money lost.?

Councillor John Gallo also spoke against the recommendation, taking a slightly different approach. His main objection was the motion on the table would authorise Mr. Downey to go forward with drafting a terms of reference that would not be required to come back to Council for approval. The only thing that would require further Council authorisation is the actual hiring of the individual as they would need to be added to the staff complement.

To this end, Councillors Ballard and Gallo suggested holding off until the next Council meeting to consolidate everything into a further report and provide further information on what it is going to take to fill a curator position.

?Without having an updated report in front of us with some vision and with some budget attached to it for the operation of a museum or providing museum services, I think this is similar to the Town hiring a snow plow operator and not factoring in what it is going to cost to provide the operator with a snow plow, sand, and salt. We have a curator and if they are going to be curating the collection there will be costs involved with that. If they are going to be taking our collection out to schools and businesses, there will be a cost to that. At least I know the cost of what is before us [from CAM, the AHS and the Centre] but I have no idea where this might go.?

For others, all these answers were readily available. Councillor John Abel, for instance, said another report was a ?waste of time.?

?We have had tremendous background information on this whole issue,? he argued. ?There is no reason to stall it anymore and ask for a report to come back that we have already received a year ago.?

Added Councillor Thompson: ?[The report] had all the things I have heard now around the table that Councillors are looking for again. It had a three-year outlook, talked about the vision and the responsibility and it gave us all that information. Sometimes you need to take a step backward to be able to move forward. The vision, the budget, all of that was presented to us. It was listed on the previous report. All we had to do was look it up and read it again for you to have all that information. We have seen it all and the best option for us to move forward is for the Town to honour its commitments, take on the responsibility, and do what Councillor Buck originally suggested and hire a curator and let's start moving forward.?