

Museum proposal courts controversy at the Council table

By Brock Weir

Bidders looking to win the contract to bring the Aurora Museum back to life need to provide Aurora with more details of their game plan.

That is the word from Councillors who argue the staff's recommendation to hand over the curating of the Aurora Museum for a five year term to Markham's Cultural Asset Management (CAM) group leads to more questions than answers.

Councillors questioned the recommendation which saw CAM score significantly higher in the evaluation process over fellow bidders the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) and the Aurora Cultural Centre, at last week's General Committee meeting.

There, Councillors wanted details on just what each proponent envisioned for a museum, as well as the costs entailed with each plan. These details, however, could not be made public under provisions in the existing RFP.

Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said each proponent was required to provide the Town with a work plan, identify what they were proposing to do, and how they were proposing to do it. All of that information was in their respective pitches, but according to Town Solicitor Warren Mar, this information would have to remain confidential without the consent of all three parties.

Further, under the terms of the RFP, there would also be a ?blackout? in the AHS, CAM, or Cultural Centre from speaking to Councillors about their vision.

Nevertheless, Mr. Downey told Councillors that CAM scored the highest marks or tied in all categories in which the proposals were reviewed. Even if one takes the fees and costs off the table and out of the equation, they still scored the highest.

?We felt Council was going to be okay with an operator that wasn't necessarily home-based,? said Mr. Downey. ?If we cancel this particular RFP, I would more than likely come back to you with some options. We might be revisiting some of the old ones again but it would be helpful for me if we had some clear direction as to what the goal of Council was.

?Some of the concerns raised previously was there was some funding issue and whether or not there was adequate funding to be able to deal with this. We had presented a long-term financial plan with regards to the collection. That wasn't acceptable to Council and I don't know whether or not you are in a position at this point to deal with it, or whether you simply want to deal with it on a year to year basis. I don't believe that is the method I would recommend.?

Details released this Tuesday, however, provided clearer information. According to numbers released by Mr. Downey, CAM scored a 57.7% on the technical side of things, and a fee of \$556,500 over five years. The AHS came in at 51.25% on the technical score, but proposed a five-year fee of \$1,248,250.

Leading up to the recommendation which was ultimately received by Councillors at the Committee level were concerns about finding that ?Made in Aurora? solution. For some Councillors, going with CAM was, at least without this further information, not that solution.

Councillor Evelyn Buck, for instance, said she would not be in favour of anything that would exclude the AHS from ?the participation and reorganization of our museum.?

?I am not going to donate to that museum until I know the people who are looking after it will have the same feeling about it as I do and there have been 10 years now that people have been waiting to donate [their items] to a museum and holding onto them until the time comes when [they can trust] it will become part of something that can be enjoyed for future generations.

?It is a unique service that we are looking for and nobody can provide those loving hands but caring volunteers.?

This was one point which the majority of Council members seemed to agree upon. It was a unique service, many argued, and one which should not necessarily be handled in the same vein as an RFP for road repairs or infrastructure improvements.

?I am trying to read between the lines [and] my mind leads to how subjective were the people on the committee in terms of giving percentages to various proponents and, in terms of the proponents, what level of services were they recommending, and what level of service do we want in the collection?? said Councillor John Gallo.

?There are more questions than there are answers and I am questioning whether this was the right process to be able to identify which direction to go. We need to know what to do next. I don't think anyone just wants to shelve this.?

After initially voting to cancel the RFP, Councillors ultimately voted to open it back up to seek further information. Speaking to his motion to do so, Councillor Thompson said they needed to know each group's vision.

?I like having as much information as possible and if all proponents are willing to share their vision of what the Aurora Museum is going to look like, I think we need to have that information before we make a final determination,? he said.

All three parties should come forward and make a presentation to Council on such a vision, according to Councillor Sandra Humfries, and this was a view bolstered by Councillor Ballard, who said the topic is ?so close to the hearts of Aurora residents.?

?We're left to try and interpret a staff report and I am just interested in trying to glean more about the vision and competence so that I feel comfortable on Tuesday when I am asked to vote on this.?

One voice of opposition around the table was that of Mayor Geoffrey Dawe who said he was in favour of moving ahead with staff's recommendation to hire CAM to resurrect the museum with the Aurora Collection.

?Staff have done exactly what we asked them to do based on the resolutions that were passed at this table,? he said. ?Quite frankly, it looks to me like we don't like the answer so we're moving to not accept the resolution.

?I was quite prepared to support the entire recommendation brought forward by staff. I had forgotten the AHS actually subcontracted to CAM to do the display last year. If we were to choose the Aurora Historical Society, would they just go and subcontract CAM again? ?