

Neighbours push back on 'restaurant' use of Victoria Hall

The future use of Victoria Hall is yet to be formally announced, but if a restaurant is in the cards, area residents say the idea is half-cooked.

Residents came to Council Chambers last week to speak out on a \$2.1 million plan to refurbish the historic landmark, located on the southwest corner of Mosley and Victoria Streets, and are set to underscore their positions in a demonstration planned for outside Victoria Hall this Thursday night, May 21, from 7 to 8 p.m.

While the delegates to last week's Committee meeting didn't question the value of preserving and refurbishing a heritage building, they say form dictates function and the function is worth another look.

'I'm speaking today as both a resident of the Town Park community and as a member of the Heritage Advisory Committee,' said Linda Durringer. 'The Town has still not clearly confirmed the intended use of the building, yet all signs point to a restaurant operation. Why are there detailed plans coming to light only now for a restaurant that are dated May 2025 and August 2025? Why has so much of this project felt secretive and undercover?'

'Residents deserve transparency. Why has there been so little disclosure about the long-term plan for Victoria Hall? The public deserves clarity regarding the costs of taxpayers funding a full restaurant conversion, complete with commercial infrastructure and equipment, rather than simply addressing the building's structural, mechanical and accessibility needs? If so, residents should have been informed openly from the beginning.'

A key component of the restoration and renovation plan is the creation of a glass atrium, set to replace the existing addition to the rear of Victoria Hall, in a bid to increase the building's accessibility and better tie it in to the balance of the Aurora Town Square redevelopment.

Durringer said this atrium comes at a significant expense, but its 'purpose and justification have never been properly explained to the public.'

'What is equally troubling is that Council appears willing to repeat the mistake that are already affecting our neighbourhood today with the Armoury,' she continued. 'Now the Town appears prepared to introduce another restaurant-style operation into the same community without openly addressing the impacts on the residents.'

'Why does the Town want to become a commercial landlord and restaurant operator? Why would the Town subsidize a restaurant? Is it truly the role of a municipal government? The entire process, from the design, to the cost escalation, to the lack of public disclosure has lacked transparency from the beginning. Restaurants deserve honesty, consultation, [and] accountability, especially when dealing with a treasured heritage property that belongs to the community. I just wonder why you didn't just come out at the beginning and say you're going to turn Victoria Hall into a restaurant?'

'I sincerely hope the new Council elected in October will better understand the impact these decisions have on the small Town Park community and will commit to a more transparent and respectful process moving forward.'

Similar concerns were voiced by resident John Hartman who questioned why Council members said 'no final decision had been made' on the building's use when diagrams showed a restaurant/bar reconfiguration.

He suggested the final decision on Victoria Hall's use and role in the community be postponed until after October's municipal election.

'I really thank you very much for coming in with your views and all the passion that you've spoken about Victoria Hall. I know that

we're trying our best to do the best we can to reflect the investments that we make in a very nice heritage piece," responded Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland. "Council did receive an email from a former member of the Heritage Committee who served many, many years on the heritage committee is very, very passionate about Heritage in the area and actually has a home in that area and wrote a very lengthy email to Council to express the support and the design and this is somebody who's also as a professional designer in protecting heritage. So, I thought it was actually very nice to receive this email from this person because normally they're very critical.

"It was very pleasant to hear that there are two sides of the pendulum, that there are people that do recognize that and there are some positive attributes to that so I just thought I'd share that because there's other there's always different sides to it."

Concerns over the use, however, were voiced by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said a restaurant use would exacerbate an identified area parking issue.

"Growth and New is very important to service the new residents that come into Aurora," said Councillor Gaertner, referencing how money held in reserve for growth will be used in this project. "They have a lot of other needs and we have a lot of restaurants in Aurora. Just going back to the traffic in the area, we know [the] parking situation was bad before we built Library Square [sic] and?in a restaurant business there's a lot of staff and hopefully they'll take public transit ? but, if not, their parking issue is going to add concern to the neighbourhood."

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter