

Next phase of Library Square development approved

By Brock Weir

The future of Library Square took another inch forward last week as Council gave the green light to beginning design options on just what might replace the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street.

Firm in their vision of a public gathering space of some sort, Council formally approved the demolition of the two buildings and putting out a new Request for Proposal for a company to bring this vision and the vision of the community to life.

While it is not the big leap forward some neighbours might have been hoping for, Council members insisted that this 'baby step' was closer than Aurora has ever come to resolving the nearly 20-year debate on what to do with the old buildings.

'We have heard from our community, we have heard from our community partners, and we have heard from all of our boards,' said Councillor Tom Mrakas. 'We are moving forward as we all want to, and as the community wants to. Last June we made a decision to demolish two buildings, we have already made that decision, we're moving forward with putting out the tender in having someone do the demolition for us. We're also putting out the tender to have someone do those detailed designs. We haven't done that.

'We have had some high view concepts. That's what we've done and now we're looking for those detailed designs. I am excited just as everyone else is to get this done and finally move forward and have something special in that area.'

Councillor Mrakas was responding to Councillor John Abel's observation that with last Tuesday's vote they are essentially back to 2013, but other members said they disagreed.

'While I understand where Councillor Abel is coming from in starting at square one, we're actually starting right now after doing some much needed research on repurposing old buildings in our community. It has been up in the air for a very long time,' said Councillor Sandra Humfries. 'We have been able to do lots of community consultation, lots of lots of public information sessions where the public were able to engage and give input on both of those options. I think we have officially conducted those surveys and those consultations officially for repurposing and that is what the biggest difference is.

'There are lots of different ideas and lots of different perspectives and we just wanted to make sure that this term we were actually able to get here. At this point there is no way but forward full force.'

This was a view shared by Councillor Michael Thompson who called the process to get to this point a 'challenging one' that has been addressed 'umpteen times' for almost 20 years, garnering 'dozens and dozens of staff reports. While he said Councillor Abel is right that this was talked about in 2013, it was also discussed in reports and talks dating back to 2003.

'From my perspective, I think this Council is closer than anyone has ever gotten in turning Library Square from a concept into a reality,' he said. 'I don't necessarily see us starting over. It has been a struggle, it has been baby steps, but sometimes it is two steps forward and one step back but I think we have all seen the progress and I am optimistic that we continue to drive this forward and hopefully see it come to fruition in this term.'

From Councillor Paul Pirri's perspective, Council was not back at the starting post but making an informed decision after two years of consultation on the Cultural Precinct Plan.

'Politicians often get in trouble when they make evidence-based decision-making but go down the path of decision-based evidence-making,' he said.

Looking over the history it has taken to get to this point, Councillor Wendy Gaertner says it is a matter that has been tackled by five Councils now and, so far, it has proven to be a 'very difficult decision to make.' Aurora has done a lot of public consultation, she said, and now the Town is on the right track.

'I am very sorry about the demolition of the Old Library, which was our Centennial gift to ourselves and I am opposed to demolishing it before we know what we're going to be doing with the property, but it is the will of the majority of Council and I do congratulate this Council on taking what I believe is one step forward as well.'

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: 'I do believe we're moving forward, perhaps faster than some might like, and not as quickly as others, which means we're probably at the right pace! I do think we're moving in the right direction and I am looking forward to continuing with that process.'

Ultimately, the 'baby step' forward was carried unanimously on a recorded vote.